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West African Food Traditions in Virginia Foodways:  
A Historical Analysis of Origins and Survivals

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in History

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by  
Lisa R. Shiflett  
August 2004

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William Douglas Burgess, Jr.  
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Keywords: foodways, African-American, Anglo-American

## ABSTRACT

West African Food Traditions in Virginia Foodways:

A Historical Analysis of Origins and Survivals

by

Lisa R. Shiflett

The degree of African cultural survivals in African-American culture has been debated since the Civil War. Convincing research that West African cultural traits did survive in African-American culture, particularly in African-American foodways, focuses on the lower south, neglecting the upper south. This thesis fills that gap by identifying West African traits in African- as well as Anglo-American foodways in Virginia, focusing on four broad research areas: Native American and Anglo-American foodways during the colonial and early Republic eras; West African foodways; African-American foodways during slavery; and current trends in Virginia foodways. Primary sources consulted for this study included archaeological reports, eighteenth and nineteenth century personal accounts, personal interviews, and published cookbooks. Drawing on these research themes, this study concludes that West African food traditions did survive slavery and have affected foodways across cultural lines in Virginia and calls for further research on post Civil War transmission processes.

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In loving memory of my grandmother,  
Nelly McAllister, for everything she taught me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Having grown up in a small town in central Virginia I was introduced at an early age to the wonders of good southern cooking. While attending college in Lynchburg, Virginia I began discussing food heritage with friends from various places throughout the United States and other countries. I also began to realize that I knew very little about the history and circumstances under which southern foodways began to develop. I began to ask questions about dishes prepared by my grandparents and those of my friends grandparents and soon realized that the key to understanding southern cooking was to understand the history of African-American foodways in the south. With African-American slaves making up the majority of the population of the south throughout its early history and slave women made up the majority of cooks in the households of the elite, it would seem impossible for anyone to deny their influence. It should also come as no surprise that white, non-slaveholding Americans began to incorporate the wonderful cooking methods and tasty recipes being used by these exceptional cooks. However there are many that have either denied, or more probably have chosen to ignore, these facts. It is my intent in this thesis to show that many middle and lower income African-American and white families in the south have in the past, and still do today, prepared and consumed many of the same uniquely southern dishes. It is also my goal to show that not only do African-Americans in the south prepared these dishes but those who migrated north and west have also carried these foodways with them, incorporating these dishes into a new food tradition known as Soul Food.

The degree of African cultural survivals in African American Culture has been under debate since the 1940s. Early historians clung to the belief that no aspects African cultural traits were strong enough survived the trauma of the Middle Passage or slavery. However, in the 1930s and 1940s this belief was challenged, not by early American historians but by anthropologists. Melville J. Herskovits led the way in his 1941 book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, where he incorporated field studies in Africa, South America, and the United States. His focus was on the effects of the forced relocation of millions of peoples of West African descent and those they came in contact with. By falling back on the teachings of his college professor, Franz Boaz,



Herskovits incorporated a method of studying human societies that allowed him to argue strongly for the existence of Africanisms in African-American religion, music, and language.<sup>1</sup>

E. Franklin Frazier took direct aim at Herskovits's beliefs specifically in African American religious practices. Nothing in Herskovits research convinced him that survivals excited. In his work *The Negro Church in America*, Frazier stated "with the breaking up or destruction of the clan and kinship organization, the religious myth and cults lost their significance."<sup>2</sup> He did, however, admit cultural carryovers in some areas of dance, language, and in the shouting churches but stated that these were isolated events.

Dissenters, like Frazier, did not slow the enthusiasm sparked by Herskovits findings. By the end of the 1940s educators, historians, and public figures were beginning to incorporate these ideas in their own rhetoric. At the forefront of this movement was John Hope Franklin. In the 1940s Franklin and others began to devise a new curriculum that was to be implemented on college campuses throughout the United States. He also wrote a textbook to help those teaching and studying African-American history better understand the subject. In *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, Franklin stated that "substantial portions of African culture not only survived the Atlantic Crossing but has persisted to the present day"<sup>3</sup> Currently there have been eight editions of this work, with Alfred A. Moss, Jr. carrying on his father-in-law's text. Historians began to pay attention to the works of those like Herskovits and Franklin in the 1970s. Included among them were scholars like Peter Wood, with his 1974 publication, *The Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, and John Blassingame's 1979 *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. In 1980 T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes published *Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore 1640-1676*, one of the first works of its kind to focus on one specific Virginia community.

In 1987 Mechel Sobel, a professor at an Israeli University specializing in United States Southern culture, published *The World They Made Together*. In this study the author expressed her surprise at discovering evidence showing eighteenth century Virginia as a biracial society.

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<sup>1</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 6.

<sup>2</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Book, 1963), 6.

<sup>3</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), 25.

By the middle of the seventeenth century 66% of the Tidewater area was of African decent. Sobel stated that in communities like these members of both groups playing, working and praying together. Sobel, like Breen and Innes, chastises those who saw Africanisms only in African American traditions, noting “on the Contrary, the social-cultural interplay was such that both black and whites were crucial influenced by the traditions of the ‘other.’ As a result, a new culture emerged in the American South that was a mix of both African and English values.”<sup>4</sup> It would take several years before historians would give Sobel's theories concerning the effects of West African culture on white Southern society the attention they disserved. In the ensuing years scholars such as Mokefi Kete Asante, Joseph Holloway, and Jessie Gaston Mulira continued to study African survivals in language, religion and music.

During the 1970s, under social and political pressure, archaeologist began to study slave sites. Although some of these studies were lacking in both structure and enthusiasm, many more were producing physical evidence that helped archaeologists, anthropologists and historian learn a great deal about life in slave communities. Theresa A. Singleton in her article “The Archeology of Slave Life” answers the question what can archeology do for African-American studies? First, she felt it would be through archeology that ethnic patterns would be identified. Second, only through archaeology could living conditions be evaluated. Third, she felt that archeology would help scholars distinguish between “value culture” or “customs, beliefs and values presumably influenced by an African heritage” and “reality culture” or “those aspects of slave life largely influenced instead by external forces, especially social controls inherent within slave society.” She felt that through archeology aspects of everyday life in slave quarters could be pieced together. Singleton was also one of the early advocates of comparing faunal analysis from African-American slave quarter sites to Anglo-American Southern cooking methods. She stated that these remains “suggest that culinary techniques used by slaves influenced the local cuisine of Southern whites as well . . . southern meals prepared in a single pot are but a few examples of the present-day legacy of the African influence in culinary practices.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mechel Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth – Century Virginia* (New Jersey: Princeton Virginia Press, 1987), 3, 5.

<sup>5</sup>Theresa A. Singleton, “The Archeology of Slave Life,” in *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South*, edited by Edward D. C. Campbell, Kym S. Rice and Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. (Charlottesville: The Museum of the Confederacy and the University Press of Virginia, 1991), 156, 161.

Taking all of these previous works into account along with archaeological studies renowned Southern historian Ira Berlin put the African-American experience into perspective with his publication of *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. In this work the author broke down into stages the arrival of slaves on the North American Continent. Berlin describes the first group of slaves to arrive as creoles who had been seasoned in the West Indies. This group included members as little as a couple of years or as much as several generation removed from their ancestral home land or at the very least had spent a good deal of time on island plantations. The next group he referred to were saltwater or those slaves coming directly from Africa. This group quickly outnumbered the former and their descendents continued to work the fields of the south for generations to come. New arrivals would continue to swell their ranks of established communities until 1808 when their importation was outlawed, their presence a reminder of to older residence of their African roots. Berlin stated that

Black life on mainland North America originated not in Africa or in America but in the nether world between the two continents. Along the periphery of the Atlantic – first in Africa, then Europe, and finally in the Americas - it was a product of the momentous meeting of African and European and then their equally fateful rendezvous with the people of the New World.<sup>6</sup>

In 1992 archaeologists once again stepped to the forefront of African-Americans studies with Leland Ferguson's fresh evaluation of slave quarter site artifacts. In this work Ferguson stated that "with the exception of a few early slave narratives, this newly found archaeological record is as close to the slave's personal story as we have ever been." Ferguson fell back on ideas of scholars like Berlin with his theory of Creolization and Breen, Inners, and Sobel who stressed that Southern society was mixed biracial society. He also saw "two distinct subcultures" existing on plantations, a slightly different viewpoint from his predecessors. Using the concepts of lexicon (word used to describe an object) and grammar (the actual rules of usage for an object) Ferguson felt that artifacts could and should be analyzed not just according to what they were but how they might have been used. In this way it was discovered that many items of

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<sup>6</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 17.

European design and use, found on slave archeological sites, were used in ways that spoke to a West African tradition. He stated that

An ignorant visitor might observe that slaves had adopted European tableware but didn't know quite how to handle them, preferring bowls and plates; a more informed observer might see West African rules of etiquette employed with a new kind of bowl.<sup>7</sup>

Lorena Walsh in 1997 took the ideas of Berlin and Ferguson and applied them to one Virginia plantation slave community in Williamsburg Virginia. In *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community*, Walsh studied the coming together of two groups of slaves; one consisting of second and third generation Virginia slaves and the other of new arrivals from the "Old World." She states that previous works on this subject had been generalized, encompassing large geographical areas. Her objective was to see if the history of one group of slaves could be studied through the written resources available and archaeological evidence. She discovered in her study that most Virginia slaves originated from the following West African societies: "Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, or Moko from the areas of present day Nigeria or adjacent Camroon."<sup>8</sup> She also learned that the coming together of these two groups did have a traumatic effect on their members. This information has been a great help to those wishing to study African survivals in Virginian societies.

Although several of the works mentioned have touched on the subject, very few studies have been dedicated to the study of foodways. Included among those who have looked at the subject are Sam B. Hillard, Karen Hess, and Charles Joyner all of whom focused on foodways in the Deep South. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the Untied States: The Performance of Group Identity* takes a modern look at foodways in the United States. In the Introduction Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell discussed foodways as a means of group identity. They stated that "foodways are interaction, encoding and highly ritualized, although taken-for-granted, set of

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<sup>7</sup>Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), xxxvi, xliii, xlii.

<sup>8</sup>Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 67.

behaviors.”<sup>9</sup> Articles in this work neglect to look specifically at African contributions to southern food or to look at modern trends from an historical perspective; however, they do help define perimeters in which such studies maybe undertaken, particularly in defining in-groups and out-groups and the use of food as a means of communication within the in-groups. Susan Kalcik, in her article “Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity,” stresses the use of food in ethnic identity and as a symbol of group identity, stating through-out her work that the continued use of traditional foods could help lessen the shock of a new environment.<sup>10</sup> And, C. Paige Gutierrez, in “The Social and Symbolic uses of ethnic/regional foodways: Cajuns and Crawfish in Southern Louisiana,” takes the symbolic use of food items to the next level by examining the use of the Crawfish in Louisiana as a symbol of group identity.<sup>11</sup>

A more recent study was published by Josephine A. Beoku-Betts a West African native studying African traditions in African-American foods. Looking once again at the Gullah Islands, an area bordering on being over studied, Beoku-Betts gave us a fresh view of foodways in the south from a West African’s perceptive. In her article, “We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity among the Gullah,” Beoku-Betts moved into a Gullah community, living with various families and sharing recipes and history. Beoku-Betts understood that the relative isolation of these communities made them an exceptional case however she felt they were a good reference point for future studies. She found that many food traditions were preserved in this community and felt that “the interaction between European American, Native American, and African American food systems in the South has carried these popular southern dishes across ethnic lines.”<sup>12</sup> She specifically pointed to the use of onions, pepper, and meats as seasonings, a practice she felt had its roots in West Africa.

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, “Introduction,” *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, edited by Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Kalcik, “Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity,” in Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell), 37-65.

<sup>11</sup> C. Paige Guierrez, “The Social and Symbolic Use of Ethnic/Regional Foodways: Cajuns and Crawfish in Southern Louisiana,” in Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, 169-184.

<sup>12</sup> Josephine A. Beodu-Betts, “We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity Among the Gullah,” *Gender and Society* 9 (1995): 544

The following study will examine foodways through out history in Virginia. Chapter two begins with an analysis of Native-American and Anglo-American food practices during the colonial and early Republic periods. This chapter contains information obtained from historical documents such as diaries, personal letters, and cookbooks from the time period. Information concerning Native American food was also obtained from both historical documents and archaeological excavations. Chapter three focuses on foodways in West African countries. Sources for this chapter included travel accounts from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries along with current writings and published cookbooks.

In chapter four I discuss foodways during slavery in Virginia through an analysis of ex-slave narratives and archaeological excavations. Although there has been a great deal of controversy over the WPA Slave Narratives, I have also chosen to include interviews from former Virginia slaves. Understanding these controversies it is my opinion that the narratives still have a great deal to offer historians. This opinion is born out by several factors that make the Virginia interview different from those conducted in other Southern states. First most of the interviews were done before the Federal Government became involved and were conducted as a research project in an attempt to preserve African-American history. Second T. C. Walker, an ex-slave, started the project and continued in the capacity of advisor and consultant when the project was taken over by the WPA. Third, the majority of the interviewers were African-American eliminating Anglo-American biases.<sup>13</sup>

Finally Chapter Five discusses the contemporary food practices of Anglo- and African-Americans in Virginia. Sources for this Chapter consist of three in-depth interviews with life-long Virginians as well as one published cookbook reflecting on the food traditions of a particular Virginia family. Through these sources I illustrate how the foodways that were established in the state by the mid-nineteenth century have continued into the twenty-first century. I have also briefly considered two Soul Food cookbooks written by restaurant owners who included recipes handed down to them through their families. These cookbooks contain recipes similar or identical to those previously discussed in Chapter Five, showing that this shared food tradition has crossed geographical boundaries in the century.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden and Robert K. Phillips, editors, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), xvii.

## CHAPTER 2

### FOODWAYS AND COOKING METHODS OF EARLY VIRGINIA

New settlers arriving in colonial America would find the skies abundant of every kind of bird, the forest teeming with wild game, fruits, nuts, berries, vegetables, and herbs, and the waters overflowing with fish and shellfish, all wonderful sources of food. So why did these new arrivals to a fertile land starve during those first years? And what changes did they make that allowed them to survive later? There are many answers to this question. For instance the weapons the settlers brought with them were not adequate for hunting nor was it safe to wander far from the settlements where hostile Indians might attack. Also, it was the belief of many historians that colonists were unwilling “to turn husband men” voluntarily.<sup>14</sup> Although these are certainly good reasons, still it would seem that a good hunter or fisherman, when faced with starvation, would take the risks necessary to provide himself and his loved ones with food. Herein, however, lies the problem.

The majority of early settlers were not hunters or fishermen. In many cases they were not even farmers but instead were businessmen with no knowledge of the skills necessary for survival. Although many men and in some areas women would die first, settlers would eventually accept the fact that if they were to make it in this new land they would have to acquire the skills necessary to feed themselves. They could not rely on English ships full of supplies whose arrival times were unpredictable, nor could they rely on their Indian neighbors whom they continued to alienate. They would have to learn to hunt and gather in the woods, fish in the streams and rivers, and farm the land around them to obtain a steady source of food. Through this process the colonists began to develop cooking techniques and eating habits suited to their new environment. Although most of the women who settled in the new colonies were illiterate, a few were taught to read and write, leaving behind cookbooks and letters containing family recipes and advice that have been passed down over generations. Through these women and the recipes they left we are given a glimpse of the types of foods that graced early North American tables.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin H. Quitt, “Trade and Acculturation at Jamestown, 1607-1609: The Limits of Understanding,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52 (1995): 233.

Early settlers, once they accepted the realities of life in the New World, learned many skills necessary for survival either directly from friendly Native Americans or by observing those who lived near by. There were several groups, such as the New England Puritans, who were aware of the failures of previous attempts at colonization due to a lack of food and the hostilities between settlers and neighboring tribes. These settlers avoided alienating the locals, realizing that to make it that first year they would need the help of these neighbors who might be willing to trade for food.

The soil and climate of the New World were not the same as that of England, and the colonists turned to Native Americans to learn which wild animals and plants along with which staple crops to grow to survive on their own in the succeeding years. In Native American societies men were responsible for hunting and fishing. Physical and chemical analysis on Native American archaeological sites have helped archaeologists and historians determine what types of animals were consumed and in what way. On the East Coast of Virginia large amounts of seafood were consumed by locals including shellfish, shad, sturgeon, and catfish. Although shellfish could be gathered, net baskets, weirs, traps, hooks, and spears were used to catch other types of seafood.<sup>15</sup> Animals hunted with projectiles and snares included deer, bear, buffalo, turkey, waterfowl, rabbits, and squirrel.<sup>16</sup> Methods for catching these animals were observed and reported by colonists. James Axtell wrote in his work, *Beyond 1492*, “a pilgrim exploration party came upon a native deer snare in the woods, which they stopped to examine.”<sup>17</sup>

Women were the planters and gatherers in early Native American Societies. They gathered edible berries, nuts, roots, stalks, and leaves from the surrounding woods, and act that would have been easily observed by new arrivals. Some items available throughout Virginia included hickory nuts and black walnuts, mulberries, plums, persimmons, grapes, strawberries,

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<sup>15</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 73, 52; Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Colombia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 23; Jane M. Eastman, “Life Course and Gender Among Late Prehistoric Siouan Communities,” in *Archeological Studies of Gender in the Southeastern United States*, edited by Jane M. Eastman and Christopher B. Rodning (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 71.

<sup>16</sup> Eastman, in Eastman and Rodning: 71; Perdue and Green, 26.

<sup>17</sup> James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 186.



and greens. The burning of undergrowth in the forest added to the supplies of gatherable produce by clearing the way for their growth and enhancing the soil.<sup>18</sup>

Native American women had successfully been introducing new plant foods to their diets for many centuries by accidental discovery and through trade. Women discovered about 3000 years ago that some of the wild plants they gathered from the forest could be cultivated when they found plants sprouting up in areas where seeds had accidentally been dropped. Included among these plants were lambs quarters, marsh elder, and sunflowers. While men did, at times, help in the clearing of land, the duties of planting, harvesting, and weeding fell to the female gender. Early on bottle gourds and squash were cultivated both for food and utensils. Around A. D. 300 corn was introduced from the south into the eastern garden and quickly became an important staple crop. Beans began to be cultivated around 1000 years ago, a plant food that not only added to the diet of the natives but also helped maintain a healthy soil for growing other foods by replacing nitrogen that crops like corn depleted.<sup>19</sup> All of these crops were planted in hills together, a technique that the colonists would have quickly been able to learn to master.

The first crop that colonist learned to grow and process from the Indians was corn. Indians taught the colonists to plant corn in hills that formed rows and they taught them what organic material to use to make fertilizer. They showed colonists that they could plant other crops such as beans between the rows of corn, each plant lending something to the other that would help it grow.<sup>20</sup> The next problem to be solved was to learn how to prepare dishes made from these new food sources in different ways that would make them both useful and appetizing; for this information they also turned to their new neighbors. Native American women were responsible for preparing foods and were also involved to some degree in hunting and fishing along with the men. It was from these women that colonist learned to process corn with a mortar and pestle. “The mortar was a hole formed in a stump, and the pestle was a log,” the stump was used as a container to hold the grain while the cook pounded it with the log. Through this method colonist learned to make corn into corn meal for bread and cracked corn into hominy or grits.

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<sup>18</sup> Perdue and Green, 73,173; Morgan, 52, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Perdue and Green, 24, 153, 24, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Elaine McIntosh, *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1995), 71.

The one pot meals and dishes such as succotash, cornpone, soups, and stews were also taught to the colonists by the Indians. Versions of these dishes were already familiar to the new arrivals causing them to be easily incorporated into their daily diet.<sup>21</sup> However, once settlements were more established colonists started to develop their own cooking techniques and their own dishes that incorporated both European and Native American styles and tastes.

As stated earlier, Native Americans preferred to prepare food through boiling, stewing, roasting, and occasionally baking. “Bowls of clay and stone” appeared on early native sites, improving cooking by allowing women to boil food over a fire instead of requiring them to use “skin bags” with hot stones in them.<sup>22</sup> Ivor Noel Hume recovered two round bottom clay pots from an excavation on Roanoke Island that would have been used for this purpose.<sup>23</sup> An “early traveler” also noted that “Indians kept a large pot constantly simmering on the fire.”<sup>24</sup> Maize, the main staple starch, was prepared on occasion by roasting ears, but usually was boiled as hominy or cornmeal mush or dumplings. A group of colonists visiting a Virginia village received cornmeal mush seasoned with fat.<sup>25</sup> Of course, corn ground into meal and made into bread was the most popular way to prepare this staple.

Fish and meats were usually prepared by roasting or stewing. Although shad was seasonal and usually baked, an abundance of shellfish and fresh and salt water fish were available year round.<sup>26</sup> Wild game consumed would have included venison, turkey, and buffalo along with small game. For example, Powhatan sent “20 turkeys and as much corn as five or six men could carry” to Christopher Newport in exchange for twenty swords. When visiting an Indian village, new arrivals were often “feasted . . . lavishly, offering prodigious quantities of

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<sup>21</sup> Quitt, 234.

<sup>22</sup> Perdue and Green, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ivor Noel Hume, *The Virginia Adventure: Roanoke to James Towne, An Archeological and Historical Odyssey* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 87.

<sup>24</sup> Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archeology and Early America, 1650-1800* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 97.

<sup>25</sup> Axtell, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Axtell, 45; Lebane Houston and Wayne Dough, editors, “Indian Food and Cooking in Eastern North Carolina,” in Heritage Education Program, <http://www.nps.gov/fora/indcooking/htm> (accessed 1 August 2004).

cornbread, venison, walnuts . . . and other edibles.”<sup>27</sup> These meats, often roasted for guests, were stewed most of the time allowing wider consumption though out the village.

Edmund Morgan pointed out in his work that Native Americans did not rely on sources of meat and fish as their principle source food; rather with women produced “50-75% of the annual diet” through gardening and gathering.<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, many of these ingredients were added to stews. Corn, both fresh and dried, and corn mush made up the base of many stews. Added to this, for flavoring and oil, could be found ground or pounded like acorns and other nuts.<sup>29</sup> Any number of wild or cultivated vegetables along with wild game or fish could have been added to this mixture, but that was not always the case. Oils for cooking were occasionally extracted from meats but also came from processing “acorns, nuts, and sunflower seeds.” However there are no indications that Indian women used this oil for frying foods during or before the colonial period. Spices used in stews included cow parsnip, bay leaves, sassafras leaves, and the ashes of certain plants. Local natives do not appear to have taken advantage of wild onions growing throughout Virginia for seasoning foods. One visitor to native villages noted that on special occasions fruits and meat were mixed in a stew and served together.<sup>30</sup>

Most cooking done by colonists was done on an open hearth in a one or two room house. The most popular cooking methods were boiling, stewing, and roasting with broiling and frying being used on occasion. Baking was accomplished either on a brick or stone or in a small compartment in the chimney.<sup>31</sup> Depending on the wealth of the family, the average kitchen might contain the following items: an iron pot, a copper skillet, a tea kettle, a frying pan, spits, a trivet, a gridiron, a jack, an iron dog and hooks, a mortar and pistil, tongs, a flesh fork, a

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<sup>27</sup> Quitt, 251, 247.

<sup>28</sup> Axtell. 236. Morgan, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Houston and Dough, <http://www.nps.gov/fora/indcooking.htm> (accessed 1 August 2004). Aside from those fruits already listed these dishes might have included local wild foods such as cassava that was described as being safe to eat even when raw and/or pumpkin.

<sup>31</sup> Sally Smith Booth, *Hung, Strung, & Potted: A History of Eating in Colonial America* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1971), 17, 15; McIntosh, 73.

skimmer, a ladle, and one or more earthenware pots.<sup>32</sup> Pots were often hung on lug poles and their height above the fire could be adjusted through the use of “ratchets, trammels, hakes or chains.” The ability to manipulate the distance a pot was from the fire allowed the cook more control over the cooking temperature and the cooking time. Another device, the “swinging metal crane,” was used for this same purpose in some southern households.<sup>33</sup> No matter what equipment was used, cooking on an open hearth was a hazardous business, both for the cook and for the house, which could easily catch fire. For this reason wealthy plantation owners quickly saw the advantages of housing the kitchen in a separate building. However, this was not an option for poorer households where wives, daughters, and others who cooked simply had to learn to work around the hazards.

Once the new colonists learned how to obtain the food, the next step was learning how to preserve it. Seasonal weather conditions did not always allow for hunting, fishing, or growing crops, leaving certain times of the year without a steady food supply. In the north the growing season was short, but the colder climate allowed for slightly better preservation of meat and fish. In the south the growing season was longer but the hot weather made meat impossible to keep without some means of preserving it. Native Americans relied heavily on drying to preserve their foods and were more willing to move into areas more conducive to obtaining natural foods. This later solution would not have been acceptable to colonists who were used to living in one location. Drying of some foods was done, but this did not provide for much variety in an already limited diet. Icehouses began to appear on some larger plantations by the middle of the seventeenth century. These houses had pits cut into the ground and were located next to a spring, stream, or well. The structures were not lined until the eighteenth century when some planters began to use brick. At the Kingsmill plantation in Williamsburg, Virginia the icehouse was located near a well that acted as both a cooling system and as a source of water. A bottle of milk located at the bottom of this well dated both the well and the icehouse some time between

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<sup>32</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, *Food*, Colonial Williamsburg Archaeological Series No. 9 (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1978), 51; For a full account from “A Trew Invetnory of the Estate of William Blaikely Deceased of What Lying on this side of James River, June the 30<sup>th</sup> 1736.” York County, Wills and Inventories, 1740-1746 is shown in Hume, 312 – 316; Booth, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Booth, 14-15.

1735-1750.<sup>34</sup> Smokehouses were also built for the purpose of preserving meat. These buildings were tightly closed boxes where meat was suspended from the rafters while a fire was maintained in a shallow fireplace made of stone or brick.<sup>35</sup>

Colonists developed several means of preserving meats, vegetables, and fruits, the most popular of which were salting, smoking, drying, pickling, and brandying. Beef, pork, and fish were usually preserved through salting, pickling, or drying. Vegetables were usually preserved by salting or pickling and fruits were usually dried or brandied. Pickling and salting were by far the most popular forms of preserving all types of food. Vinegar for pickling was made at home from a variety of ingredients. Audrey Noel Hume described two processes for making vinegar, the first was made by soaking raisins in spring water in a stone jar set by the chimney, and the other was made by fermenting coarse “Lisbon sugar and yeast.”<sup>36</sup> The fermentation process lasted from March through June at which time the liquid was removed and placed in stone jars. These two processes were not the only ones however; almost every cookbook contained several recipes for vinegar. Martha Jefferson, in her personal cookbook, included a recipe for vinegar pickle specifically for beef. The ingredients for this pickle included brown sugar, saltpeter, salt, and cuts of meat such as brisket or tongue.

Slace your beef moderately when first cut out and let it lae for 3 days. Then drain if from the brine it has made and put it in the above pickle. 4 or 5 weeks is long enough for it to remain according to the [cut] of the beef.<sup>37</sup>

Beef was prepared either by boiling, roasting, or hashing and appears to have been very popular, at least in Virginia. Although bovine were found in the early stages of all of the colonies, it was not uncommon for colonists who could afford it to import dried beef from England. Hume, in her study of the inventories of the early governors of Virginia, found that

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<sup>34</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 10. For a detailed description of icehouses in Williamsburg including the ones mentioned by Audrey Noel Hume, see Ivor Noel Hume, *Historical Archaeology: A Comprehensive Guide for Both Amateurs and Professionals to the Techniques and Methods of Excavating Historical Sites*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1975), 144.

<sup>35</sup> Ivor Noel Hume, 139.

<sup>36</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Martha Jefferson, Unpublished pages from Jefferson’s personal cookbook, “Martha Jefferson Randolph papers,”ms5385-y, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

Frances Fauquier had ordered 700 pounds of preserved beef from England that arrived after his death. This meat was packed in casks containing 230 pounds each and upon arrival was sold for “4 pence, ½ penny a pound.”<sup>38</sup> When a calf or a cow was butchered in the colonies there was very little of it that was not used. Calf’s heads, beef hearts, oxtails, kidneys, and livers were all considered delicacies in colonial Virginia. Also, the hooves were used for making jellies, bone marrow was extracted for protein, and the hides were used for clothing. Hooves and bones could also be found in pies and puddings. A recipe for “Plumk’d Currents” contained eight eggs, bone marrow, suet, sack, bread crumbs, and a pint of cream all of which were to be boiled for two hours and served with sliced almonds, wine, sugar, and butter.<sup>39</sup> A particular favorite seems to have been calf’s head, recipes for which could be found in most family cookbooks. Although there are variations on each, Martha Jefferson’s recipe seems to be typical. The head was to be scraped clean and the brain removed. Then the head was boiled until the meat separated from the bone. The meat was cut into slices. The brain was cleaned and beaten thin. This was mixed with bread and butter, seasoned with salt and pepper, and made into balls. The balls were to be added to veal gravy that had been thickened with butter and flour.<sup>40</sup> Tongue was considered a special dish and was likely to be served when guests were present. Hume found tongue listed in the kitchen inventories of two Virginia governors upon their deaths. The kitchen inventories of Governor Botetourt in 1770 listed two tongues and that of Governor Fauquier in 1768 listed thirteen ox tongues.

Pork was another favorite, particularly in the Deep South, because it was easily preserved for long periods of time by smoking, salting, or pickling. Hume described the eighteenth century swine as “long-nosed, large tusked with ridges of sturdy bristles down its back.” If almost every part of the cow was used for food or clothing, it seems that no part of swine went unused, right down to the bristles across its back which were used for making brushes. Fresh pork was often prepared by roasting, broiling, or boiling. The head, liver, tongue, and ears were all considered delicacies and would be preserved or cooked fresh. Smoked and slated pork was consumed in all

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<sup>38</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Jefferson cookbook, Martha Jefferson Randolph papers; Amelia Simmons, *The First American Cookbook: A Facsimile of “American Cookery,”* 1796, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958), 22.

the colonies, usually as bacon (side and back meat) or ham (leg and thigh), although these cuts were confused, with ham often being referred to as bacon and bacon as ham in written records.<sup>41</sup>

Poultry was not usually preserved but was consumed fresh and was in the form of domestic chickens as well as wild ducks, geese, turkeys, and pigeons. Poultry was prepared by roasting, fricasseeing, broiling, boiling, frying, or mincing. According to Hume, “every site excavated in Williamsburg in the past twenty years has yielded its share of colonial chicken bones.”<sup>42</sup> Martha Jefferson included a recipe for soup in her cookbook that contained, among other things, chicken as its last ingredient. The recipe called for potatoes, bacon, onions, and parsley, cut into small pieces and placed in an earthenware pot. Next the cook was to add lima beans and peeled tomatoes with thyme. This was all to be boiled about one hour at which time the chicken was to be added. The soup was thickened with flour and butter.<sup>43</sup> Pigeon, popular in the southern colonies, could be stewed, boiled, broiled, or made into puddings and pies. Goose was usually prepared by roasting and stuffing the bird with herbs and spices. Hard boiled eggs could also be added to the herb and spice mixture.<sup>44</sup>

Mutton was used less often than beef, pork, or chicken for several reasons. First sheep had another important purpose; their wool was needed for producing clothing. Second the meat produced from butchering sheep was not easily preserved making it necessary to consume it fresh. Sheep were general killed in the fall or early winter and were cut into roasts or chops. Amelia Simmons listed a recipe for roast mutton in her cookbook that covered several different cuts of meat.

If a breaft let it be cauled, if a leg, ftuffed or not, let it be done more gently than beef, and done more. The chine, faddle or leg require more fire and longer time than the breaft, &c. ganifh with fcraped horfe radifh, and ferve with potatoes, beans, colliflowes, water-creffes, or boiled onion, caper fauce, mafed turnip, or lettuce.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 16, 17, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 23. Hume made this statement in 1978 while her husband, Ivor Noel Hume, was still head of Archaeology in Williamsburg, Virginia; a position he had held sense the 1960s.

<sup>43</sup> Jefferson cookbook, Martha Jefferson Randolph papers.

<sup>44</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Simmons, 17.

The heart could be served with bacon and the kidneys could be made into a pie by mixing it with pigeon, chicken, ox, cock's combs, and oysters.

As with sheep swine, and cows, chickens were domestic animals that could be found in the colonies by the eighteenth century, but using domesticated animals for food was not always economical or possible. With wild game and fish available, it only made sense to use what could be gotten for the price of some time and energy. The rivers and ocean waters of colonial America were abundant with fresh fish and shellfish waiting to be caught. Once the methods for collecting and catching seafood were known, this ready and, by all accounts, abundant food supply was quickly incorporated into the colonial diet. The list of seafood consumed in Colonial Williamsburg included everything from porpoise to catfish to every kind of shellfish. Because of the fragile condition of fish remains and the acidic soil of Virginia, few archaeological remains have been found. However, a few remains of some of the larger species of fish from the Chesapeake Bay, such as Black Drum, have been found on sites like Carter's Grove. Written records show that sturgeon, shad, and catfish were all popular during the colonial period, as were herring and cod, which were often eaten fresh or preserved through salting or drying.<sup>46</sup> Margaret Taylor Chalmers gave a recipe for spiced fish stew with the following ingredients: butter, onions, fish, oysters, fish or chicken broth, water, tomatoes, salt pork potatoes, shrimp, cucumbers, parsley, mace, cloves, nutmeg, and lemon peel. Oysters were probably the most popular shellfish in Virginia, being found in "almost every deposit of domestic rubbish."<sup>47</sup> These shellfish, much like today, were served either pickled or fried. The shells of oysters had a secondary use; they were used to make mortar for buildings. Clams and crabs were also popular.

In the early years of the colonies, before the demand for furs and skins depleted the supply of forest animals, wild game was a ready source of meat. By the eighteenth century improvements in weapons made hunting wild game much easier. Bear, deer, rabbit, beaver, otter, opossum, and squirrel became regulars on the tables of most colonists. Deer or venison could be roasted or made into venison stew, as was noted by Dr. Edward Mead in a handwritten

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<sup>46</sup>Audrey Noel Hume, 2, 26, 28, 27-30.

<sup>47</sup>Margaret Taylor Chalmers, *Colonial Fireplace Cooking & Early American Recipes* (East Lansing: Eberly Press, 1995), 28.



introduction to H. E. Brown's cookbook, *Cookery*.<sup>48</sup> Rabbit has always been both plentiful and popular. Audrey Noel Hume indicated that throughout Williamsburg rabbit faunal remains were found in the excavations of several kitchens trash pits and during excavations of Carter's Grove the skeletal remains of no less than forty-four cottontail rabbits were recovered.<sup>49</sup> One recipe for stewed rabbit was as follows:

Beat it well with a rolling pin in its own blood. Cut it into little bits and fry them. Then put the hare into a stew pan with a quart of strong gravy, pepper and salt according to the palate, and let it stew till tender. Thicken it with butter and flour. Serve it up in its gravy with sippets in the dish and lemon slices for garnish.<sup>50</sup>

Any small wild game, such as beaver, otter, or squirrel, could be made into Brunswick Stew. Margaret Taylor Chalmers listed a recipe that included: chicken, rabbit, bay leaves, peppercorn, parsley, celery, potatoes, onions, mace and salt pork, fresh corn cut from the cob, lima beans, tomatoes, salt, pepper, oregano, thyme and savory.<sup>51</sup>

Colonists also had an abundance of vegetables, both domestic and wild. Soil samples taken from excavations at Wetherburns' Tavern showed that both yellow and summer squash were consumed in colonial Virginia and written records indicate that squash was consumed throughout the south where it grew wild. Salads were often made from plants that grew wild such as parsley, lettuce, cresses, spring onions, cucumbers, radishes, and mustard greens. Dressings for these salads were made from vinegar, mustard, salt, and oil.<sup>52</sup> Cooked vegetables consisted of carrots, cauliflower, turnips, beets, and celery. Tomatoes, originally grown as an ornament, became a popular food by the eighteenth century. Julian Hartman had several suggestions for pickling tomatoes both green and ripe. For pickling green tomatoes she stated that they should be sliced, salted, stacked, and left setting for twelve hours. Then the tomatoes

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<sup>48</sup>Dr. Edward Meade, Introduction to an unpublished cookbook by Harriet Meade Brown, "Meade Family Papers, 1785-1863," ms10126-b, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>49</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Booth, 84.

<sup>51</sup> Chalmers, 24.

<sup>52</sup>Audrey Noel Hume, 24.

were to be drained and dried. Next the cook should mix cloves, allspice, black pepper, mustard, and mustard seed. Last she was to slice onions and layer the tomatoes, spices, and onions in an earthenware jar that was to be covered with a lid and left to simmer for four or five hours.<sup>53</sup> Most vegetables were preserved by some form of canning or pickling process either in earthenware jars or in bottles.

Almost every meal included a gravy or sauce of some kind, and it was not unusual for these to be made of vegetables, herbs, and spices. For example Hartman listed in her cookbook several different recipes for catch-up, one of which included tomatoes, salt, black pepper, mustard, and sharp vinegar. Another recipe called for cayenne pepper instead of black indicating a taste for hot, spicy food.

It seems apparent from reading several cookbooks and excerpts from several diaries, that colonial Americans liked their sweets. Fruits and berries were abundant when in season if the person picking them was quicker than the animals or birds that also favored them. Among the fruits and berries that could be found in Colonial America were cherries, pomegranates, peaches, plums, melons, and several varieties of berries including strawberries.<sup>54</sup> All of these could be made into pies, preserves, jellies, and even wines and liquors. Hartman included in her cookbook recipes for ginger cake, pound cake, and apple pudding. Hartman also included several recipes for the popular mince meat pie.

5 pounds of meat, 2 pounds of raisins, 2 pounds of sugar and  
nutmeg, 2 spoons of cinnamon, 3 quarts of sweetcider, 3 pints of  
spirit or brandy 6 pounds of apples.<sup>55</sup>

Hartman also included in her cookbook many recipes for making wine including current wine, blackberry wine, and grape wine. Martha Jefferson had an interesting recipe for making apple dumplings. "Take some well raised dough prepared for bread, work in some butter or lard, put in the apples in the usual way." Jefferson indicated that she believed that dumplings and piecrusts

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<sup>53</sup>Julian Hartman, Unpublished family cookbook, "Bantz Family Papers, 1740-1900,"ms 8884-e, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>54</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Hartman family cookbook, Bantz Family Papers.

made in this way were much better than those made in the “usual way.”<sup>56</sup>

This last statement leads us to what was, without a doubt, the most important part of every colonist’s diet, bread. The bread consumed by colonist’s was, for the most part, described as coarse and probably most often made from ground corn. The account records and vouchers of Lewis Hartman showed large volumes of items being exchanged, items being charged, and debts being paid. Among these items, corn and rye were the grains most often being purchased. With such coarse bread being the main staple, white bread was seen as a luxury. Virginia J. R. Trist received a letter from her sister describing a stop on her journey where she was given “bread as white as snow.”<sup>57</sup> Mary Todd wrote to Edward Mead requesting three barrels of Mr. Giles “best” four, which he was to send to the cousins of “Aunt Le-Mesurea” on her behalf.<sup>58</sup> Todd stated in her letter that the people to receive this gift placed a great deal of importance on having white bread.

When food was available, colonial Americans usually enjoyed three meals a day. However, it is important to point out that these meals were not being taken in the same manner that is common in the United States today. Breakfast was usually consumed after the day had already started and was made up mostly of liquids such as tea, milk, or chocolate with the occasional addition of fruit. Larger breakfasts, where meat might be consumed, were usually only served when people were about to go on a journey. Dinner, served between one and three o’clock, was the main meal of the day and would have consisted of at least two courses. It was at this meal that people often took the opportunity to celebrate by preparing large numbers of lavish dishes. Supper was served around seven o’clock, if it was eaten at all, and would consist of cold meats or fruits.<sup>59</sup>

In understanding any culture, we must understand those traits that are an intricate part of that culture. An understanding of the types of foods being eaten and the techniques used to prepare those foods can help historians better understand the environment in which the colonists

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<sup>56</sup> Jefferson cookbook, Martha Jefferson Randolph papers.

<sup>57</sup> Virginia J. R. Trist, Letter from an unnamed sister, “Trist Family Papers, 1818-1916,” ms385-f., Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>58</sup> Meade, Meade Family Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Audrey Noel Hume, 9.

lived. It is necessary to understand that during the colonial period “food was central to the European’s adjustment in the new land.” Through a combination of Indian and European techniques colonists developed methods for “producing, processing, and preparing foods” that were more favorable to their new environment.<sup>60</sup> Climate variations throughout the thirteen colonies caused slightly different cooking and preservation methods; however, with open trade between colonies, a variety of foods became available to those who could afford them. Once hunting, fishing, and farming methods were learned and different techniques for preservation were adopted, food became more available in all social classes. The coming together of European and Native American foods culminated in to a uniquely Colonial American food tradition. However, the contributions of Native Americans to colonial foods, though extremely important, can not explain the development of a separate Southern food tradition. Native Americans in Virginia taught settlers which native plants and animals to cultivate and consume, but the number of aboriginal inhabitants in the colony quickly dwindled, limiting their influence on new arrivals. This along with the colonists’ growing animosity to the native population in which, as Morgan pointed out, “they bent their efforts more to exterminating than to enslaving the Indians.”<sup>61</sup> Only one other group entering the colonies during this time period obtained the population numbers to have strongly influenced the newly developing societies of the south, and more specifically Virginia. It is to West Africa, and the slave trade that forced the importation of many thousands West Africans into the Americas, that we must look for most of the contributions to American Southern Cooking.

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<sup>60</sup> McIntosh, 75.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, 100.

### CHAPTER 3

#### WEST AFRICAN FOOD AND COOKERY

Corn, rice, cassava, bananas, plantains, yams, and okra have been main staples of West African diet for over two centuries. Although innovations, such as the electric stove, have increasingly become a part of more prominent West African kitchens, many of the traditional recipes and cooking methods practiced in the seventeenth and eighteenth century still exist today. Anthropologists have long understood that “dietary reconstruction and nutritional assessment of the topic of diet and nutrition are central to the understanding of the evolutionary journey of human land.”<sup>62</sup> Many European and Arabian travelers wrote detailed accounts of their experiences as they visited West African countries throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. These accounts include description crops being grown and foods being prepared. Todeusz Lewicki, in her work *West African Food in the Middle Ages: According to Arabic Sources*, translated several Arab travel accounts from the middle ages that included detailed descriptions of foods being produced and consumed in Ghana, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Two of the most detailed European travel accounts came from being Jean Barbot who visited Guinea and Sierra Leone in the sixteenth century and Thomas Winterbottom, a physician, who visited Sierra Leone in the 1790s. A more recent traveler to West Africa was R. H. Finnegan who conducted field research from 1960-1961 among the Limba people of Sierra Leone. Although some regional difference do occur, a study of these primary sources along with a discussion of food production and recipes currently in use will show a consistent pattern of foodways across many West African countries.

First, a brief discussion of climate and vegetation zones will be necessary in understanding similarities and difference between crop production and wild gathering from area to area. West Africa has fluctuating climate zones that shift between moist “maritime air and dry continental air.” The maritime winds blow from the southwest and bring a great deal of rain to the coast. The dryer northeastern winds, on the other hand, cause dry conditions as one moves in land and north. These varying climate zones cause matching zones of vegetation. Where rainfall is the heaviest, on the coast, rainforest are predominant. Here crops are restricted to those

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<sup>62</sup> Kenneth F. Kiple and Driemhild Conee Ornelas, *The Cambridge World History of Food*, Vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

requiring little sunlight and heavy moisture except where local populations are willing to clear areas opening up the rainforest canopy to sunlight. Further inland are the Mangrove Swamps where crops are restricted to those able to survive in swamp areas. In the north are the dryer Savanna areas.<sup>63</sup> In each of these zones “the importance lay in a people’s ability to learn the life cycle of plants and animals in order to manipulate to their own ends and thereby ensure the availability of nutrients for dietary purposes.”<sup>64</sup>

Due to limited space not every crop produced or gathered for food consumption will be addressed in this study; however, widely consumed items that fall under certain main categories will be examined. The principal categories used include grains, meats, and vegetables, as well as brief discussions of cooking methods and utensils and food containers both in modern and historical context.

Grain consumption and production in West African countries consisted mostly of millet, corn, and rice. Finnegan described millet (or sorghum) as second only to rice in grain importance.<sup>65</sup> Millet is native to West Africa with its domestication being traced back 5000 years. Eight domesticated species are currently available. Millet grows best in arid-semiarid zones. Currently Race *Nigritarum* is dominant in areas from the Sudan to Nigeria; *Globosum* is dominant in Western Nigeria; and Race *Leonis* is dominant in Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Mauritania. Grain Sorghum (a variety of millet) grows best in areas of high rainfall. This grain has been described as a “small and hard grain” and processed into flour or consumed like rice.<sup>66</sup>

Of the Arabic sources Lewicki translated, millet was mentioned by Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani, Leo Africanus, Al-Muhallabi, Sac-id, Bath, and al-Idrisi. Of those who visited Ghana, Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani, who Lewicki described as the “earliest known Arabic writer,” mentioned millet, which he called “dukh.” Leo Africanus, traveling in Ghana in 1512, described the area as being “rich in corn”. Although maize may already have arrived in Africa, it is more probable that Africanus was referring the millet because he later used the common

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<sup>63</sup> Thurston Shaw, *Nigeria: It's Archaeology and Early History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol. 1, 14.

<sup>65</sup> R. H. Finnegan, *Survey of the Limba People of Northern Sierra Leone* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1965), 86.

<sup>66</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 114, 154.

names Bulrush and Pearl. Al-Mahallabi, an Arab geographer, stated that in the town of Audagha millet was second only to wheat in production and popularity.<sup>67</sup>

The production of millet is also discussed in travel accounts from Niger, including those of Leo Africanus, Sac-id, and Bath. Leo Africanus, in 1526, described the area as “entirely suitable for cultivation and that corn grew there in abundance.” Sac-id, also a thirteenth century geographer, mentioned beans and “anili” as man dietary staples. Lewicki wrote that the word “anili” translated to “banj” which meant millet. Bath, who traveled through middle Niger between 1849 and 1855, described the growing of millet by the people of “Timbuktu, Arabinda, Say, and Sinder.” From his observation he determined that “so wide an extension of the cultivation of dukn can hardly be a recent development of the past few centuries.”<sup>68</sup>

Only one of the Arabic sources discussed by Lewicki mentioned the occurrence of millet in Senegal. Al-Idirisi, traveling among the Wolof in 1154, mentioned millet briefly in his writing. He inferred that the Wolof planted two types of millet, which were assumed to be Bulrush and Pearl, although he did not state this specifically.<sup>69</sup>

Although Winterbottom only gave passing mention to millet in Sierra Leone, where it was a secondary crop to rice, Barbot discussed the grain in detail in his letters from both Senegal and Sierra Leone. It was Barbot who first stated that the term corn was used interchangeably to refer to both maize and millet. In describing its cultivation Barbot stated that first the land to be used was cleared by burning the underbrush. Next an iron tool (probably obtained from European traders) was used to turn the soil and seeds were planted. Barbot stated that

they have two methods of putting the seed in the ground. Some make holes a finger-length into which they drop 3 – 4 grains of millet; and others put the seeds into furrow, which are drawn in a straight line, and then cover the furrow lightly with earth.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Tadeusz Lewicki, *West African Food in the Middle Ages According to Arabic Source* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 21, 24, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Lewicki, 21-22, 24, 25-27.

<sup>69</sup> Lewicki, 30.

<sup>70</sup> John Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712*, Edited by P.E.H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law (London: Haykluyt Society, 1992), 91; also see 72, 99.

It took approximately three months for the plants to become mature enough to be cut with a “small bill-hook” knife. The canes were left in the field for thirty days to dry before being stored in a common hut. To obtain the finished product the millet had to be threshed, but Barbot stated that this was only done as it was needed.

Barbot wrote that Guinea was “abounding in millet” and in both this country and Sierra Leone women were responsible for preparing the grain to be eaten. Barbot described only two processes for preparing millet for consumption. The first was a dish called “causcou.” For this, millet was turned into flour, mixed with water, and kneaded into dough. The dough was then made into egg sized balls that were placed in a pan with holes in the bottom. The pan was placed over food already being boiled so that the dough could be steamed. The dough could also be made into small cakes and baked on hot stones. A dish prepared from millet bran was “sanglet.”<sup>71</sup> In this dish the millet was boiled and consumed like rice by the poor with meat or vegetables being added when available.

Rice has been for many centuries the most important grain grown in most West African countries. Another member of the grass family, this grain was domesticated around 1000 BC and made its way from Asia to West African through Madagascar. Through the colonization process between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century rice became the main staple crop with both wetland and dry-land varieties being grown.<sup>72</sup> Although Lewicki stated that rice was mentioned often in Arabic travel writings, she gave few examples, and those containing limited information, but both Winterbottom and Barbot discussed it in more detail.

Arabic sources did not mention rice in Nigeria, but two of those who traveled to Ghana did so briefly along with one account came from Senegal. Leo Africanus and Ibn Battuta, traveling among the Walata in 1352 described rice production in Ghana as “abundan[t] and the grain as being easily obtained.” Calial-Janahani al-Mghribi, a traveler among the Takrur of Senegal, stated that rice was easy to obtain and was often eaten with “honey and butter.”<sup>73</sup>

In letters from Senegal and Sierra Leone, Barbot paid a little more attention to the production and consumption of rice, noting that in Senegal the grain was produced only in

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<sup>71</sup> Barbot, 122, 123. This version of causcou is the West African dish and is not to be confused with the North African starch staple.

<sup>72</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 142.

<sup>73</sup> Lewicki, 35, 34.



limited quantities with “people in this district mak[ing] almost no use of it.” He did mention that it was cultivated in an area of Senegal called Caboverdo. In Sierra Leone, however, Barbot saw rice as the most important crop. Near the coast “women pound the rice in slightly hollowed tree-trunks and wash it in sea-water.” According to Barbot the main form of preparation for rice included boiling the grain with meat, chicken, or fish or rolling the cooked grain into balls and eating it like bread.<sup>74</sup> It was apparent from Barbot’s description that he did not enjoy the rice dishes prepared for him during his travels in Sierra Leone.

Winterbottom, while in Sierra Leone, wrote in some detail about the process by which dry-land rice was sown and harvested and his descriptions were backed up by Finnegan’s field research in the 1960s. There are thirteen varieties of dry-land rice and seeds are sown by throwing, dropping, or drilling into the ground close to the surface.<sup>75</sup> The dry-land rice cultivated in Sierra Leone was a red skinned variety known as *Oryza Glaberrima*.<sup>76</sup> Cultivation of this rice could be traced back 3000 years, and it is generally grown on land cleared on hillsides. First young men burned the underbrush during the dry season to clear the land. Next, the seeds were sown, this “process consisted in throwing the rice upon the ground, and lightly scratching it into the earth with a kind of hoe.” A hut was built for women and children to stay in while watching over the fields to keep birds from eating the newly planted seeds. Once the rice was harvested the rice straw was tied into sheaves.

The grain is winnowed by means of a piece of mat, having a stick for a handle, not unlike an English hand fire screen. One person pours the grain from some height, and three or four standing round keep up a constant current of air with these fans or mats.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Barbot 73,186, 276.

<sup>75</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 143.

<sup>76</sup>Finnegan, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone*, 2d ed. (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1969), 50, 51.

According to Finnegan other crops could be interspersed with rice including millet, cotton, corn, or beans. Although men were mainly responsible for cultivating rice, women would be responsible for these additional crops.<sup>78</sup>

Corn, or maize, was a New World crop, reaching Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Maize originated from a member of the grass family placing it in the cereal or grain family. The *Cambridge World History of Food* placed maize second in importance in worldwide cereal consumption. There are currently three accepted theories concerning the grass origins of maize. The first theory stated that this grain descended from an annual *Teosinte*, a grass found in Mexico and Guatemala; another theory stated that the grain came from an unknown “wild maize; and the third stated that it was a hybrid of the two. Regardless of which theory one subscribed to, domestication of maize has been traced back 7,000 to 10,000 years. By the seventeenth century maize had reached the Gold Coast of Africa and by the eighteenth century it was being used as a cheap food for slaves.<sup>79</sup>

Both Winterbottom and Barbot mentioned the use of maize in their writings, but in both cases references were brief and only in passing. Although maize would eventually replace other staple starches in some areas like the Congo, Benin, and Western Nigeria, Winterbottom only mentioned the harvesting of maize in Sierra Leone and on the Gold Coast and Barbot wrote of in the same way from Sierra Leone and Guinea. According to Winterbottom, on the Gold Coast maize was reduced to powder, made into dough, left over night, and baked into bread the next day.<sup>80</sup> Barbot, in his letters from Sierra Leone, stated that maize was often grown with other crops such as cane, yams, and rice. While in Guinea he described the local inhabitants roasted ears of maize directly in the fire.<sup>81</sup> Like millet and rice, maize was often transformed into a mush or a paste that could be formed into balls and eaten with stews, sauces, or relishes. Two

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<sup>78</sup> Finnegan, 87, 85. Sowing and cultivation were carried on in the following pattern: March, cleaning land; May – June, sowing and hoeing and hut was built; July – August, weeding was done by women; August – October – children guarded the fields from birds; October, harvested; The grains were then dried, threshed, fanned, piled up, and covered with rice straw. All of this work was accompanied by drumming and singing.

<sup>79</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 97, 99, 100, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Winterbottom, 55.

<sup>81</sup> Barbot, 189, 123

dishes, Kenkey and Ogi, are made by soaking and fermented kernels of corn, a process similar to that used in colonial America to make hominy.<sup>82</sup>

Of the fruits, vegetables, and root plants consumed in West Africa the most popular were the tubers sweet potatoes and yams, cassavas, melons, plantains, and bananas. Yams were domesticated from the wild species in Africa about 6,000 BC.<sup>83</sup> Although they are currently cultivated throughout Africa in gardens and among other field crops, these tubers are still hunted wild as well. Sweet potatoes on the other hand were another New World crop introduced to West African countries by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century as a part of the slave diet. Of the Arab sources, both Ibna Battuta and al-Comari mentioned the cultivation of yams in the fourteenth century but neither traveler discussed the extent of this cultivation or how the tubers were processed once cultivated.<sup>84</sup> Winterbottom only briefly mentioned the cultivation of yams in Sierra Leone but does not specify whether he was speaking of the Old World or New World tubers, the term's yam and sweet potatoes were often used interchangeably.<sup>85</sup>

It was from Barbot that we were given the most information concerning yams. He mentioned the cultivation and preparation of yams in both Guinea and Sierra Leone. In the later he described yams as a "plentiful" food item. The tubers were prepared as a dish by boiling them into "porridge" for children to eat. While in Guinea he wrote "among the many tubers known only among the blacks are the potatoes and certain yams."<sup>86</sup>

Watermelons and cucumbers were well known tuberous fruits that also had their roots in Africa. There exist three major categories of cucurbits whose origins were there: cucumbers, melons, and watermelons. These three were often grown in desert and Savanna areas as a secondary crop with melons originating in West Africa and watermelons in south and central Africa.<sup>87</sup> Two of Lewicki's Arab sources reported the use of cucumbers. Al-Baki, in 1068, "reported that cucumbers flourished at Audaghast on the boarder of the Sahara." Leo Africanus

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<sup>82</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 123.

<sup>83</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 215.

<sup>84</sup> Lewicki, 49-50.

<sup>85</sup> Winterbottom, 55.

<sup>86</sup> Barbot, 269, 73.

<sup>87</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 305.

stated that they were used often in middle Niger and in Goa. There were two possible references to watermelon by Arab sources. Ibn Battuta indicated that the Walata grew melons under palm trees. He later commented about eating watermelon while traveling throughout the region. Valent Fernandes, traveling between 1506-1507, indicated that he saw melons being grown as an additional source of water in drier areas.<sup>88</sup> Barbot also wrote home about seeing watermelons being harvested in both Guinea and Sierra Leone where they were cultivated among other crops.<sup>89</sup>

Bananas and plantains were tropical plants whose original arrival in Africa was attributed to Arab traders. These tropical plants appear to have spread from east to west. The two fruits were differentiated by the amount of moisture each contained: bananas contain 83% and plantains contain 65%. On average bananas were consumed either raw or cooked while plantains were served cooked. There are approximately five hundred varieties currently used worldwide, all of which were restricted to wet, tropical climate zones. It is believed that “bananas moved from Malesia to Oceania, Africa, Central America, and Caribbean.”<sup>90</sup>

Both Alice Dede, in her book *Ghanaian Favorite Dishes*, and Dorinda Hafner, in her work *A Taste of Africa: Traditional and Modern African Cooking*, listed recipes that included the use of plantains. Dede offered a recipe for Akrakro that included plantains, palm oil, and some type of dough to which salt, pepper, and onions were added. First the plantain was peeled, beaten, and mixed with the dough. Lastly the dough was rolled in balls and cooked in hot oil.<sup>91</sup> Hafner’s recipe, also originated in Ghana, was for a simple fried plantain dish, much like fried apples. The plantain was fried in deep oil, removed, and sprinkled with sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg.<sup>92</sup> Plantain and banana trees were generally grown in gardens near dwellings and their leaves also often served as wraps for cooking and dishes for eating.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Lewicki, 64, 65, 64.

<sup>89</sup> Barbot, 72, 187.

<sup>90</sup>Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 178, 175, 177.

<sup>91</sup> Alice Dede, *Ghanaian Favorite Dishes: Favorite Ghanaian Recipes Originally Collected and Tried by Nutritionists All Over the Country* (Accra: Anowuo Educational Publication, 1969), 24.

<sup>92</sup> Dorinda Hafner, *A Taste of Africa: Traditional and Modern African Cooking* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>93</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 176

Cassava were introduced from South America to West Africa by the Portuguese as part of the Columbian exchange, but their cultivation did not become prevalent until the nineteenth century when former slaves began to return to Africa.<sup>94</sup> Winterbottom was the only primary sources that gave much attention to this new plant food, mentioning their use in Sierra Leone.<sup>95</sup> In this country Finnegan also notes cassava was considered a famine food “either planted among the rice, when is considered to be the men’s crop, or grown in their compound or swamp gardens by the women.”<sup>96</sup> Other crops grown with cassava would have included sweet potatoes, onions, tomatoes, pumpkins, maize, yams, and/or okra.<sup>97</sup> Both the leaves and the roots of this plant were edible. The leaves were often cooked as a vegetable or made into a sauce and the root could be boiled and pounded into flour or fried in the same way yams and plantains were.

A favorite way of preparing cassava was to make fufu. A large number of recipes exist for making this “dough”, but the one given by Dede appeared to be the most basic and widely used. She stated that fufu could actually be made from “cassava, yams, plantains, or coco yams” or any combination of these vegetables.<sup>98</sup> Cassava was the only item that could not be mixed, to make cassava fufu the vegetable must be the only ingredient. First the root was cleaned and placed in a saucepan where it was set to boil until it became soft. Once cooled the cassava was beaten into dough, separated into balls, and served with a soup or stew.

Groundnuts were an essential dietary ingredient for many West Africans. Originating in South America and transplanted to West African by Portuguese slave traders during the sixteenth century, groundnuts are “tropical legumes with pods that grow underground to protect the plant’s seeds from seasonal droughts and from being eaten by animals.”<sup>99</sup> The two current leading producers of groundnuts are Nigeria and Senegal.<sup>100</sup> Finnegan also found groundnuts to be a common crop grown by women in Sierra Leone where they were grown either in a separate field

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<sup>94</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 184.

<sup>95</sup> Winterbottom, 55.

<sup>96</sup> Finnegan, 86.

<sup>97</sup> Finnegan., 87.

<sup>98</sup> Dede, 14.

<sup>99</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 364.

<sup>100</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol. 1, 366.

from the rice crops or in fields where rice was no longer cultivated. In the *Anthropologist's Cookbook* Kuper included a recipe for "Groundnut Stew from Sierra Leone" by Gay Cohen that started with the frying of meat with onions and peppers. To this was added meat stock and salt and the combination was left to cook for one and a half to two hours. Once completed, okra, pounded nuts, and pureed tomatoes were added and the stew was served with bananas, fruit, or fried plantain.<sup>101</sup> Hafner also included a more modern Ghanaian recipe she called "Peanut Soup with Guinea fowl and Dumplings." This recipe included a peanut paste, onions, tomatoes, chilies, and mushrooms, smoked or salted fish, and potato dumplings. Hafner stated that chicken could be substituted for Guinea Fowl and that the soup was to be eaten with one's fingers by serving it with fufu or some similar substance. The "fufu should sit like a island in a sea of soup, with meat or fish scattered over top."<sup>102</sup>

West Africans obtained protein from four major sources: cattle, goats, fowl, and fish. Although traders introduced pork into West African countries, it does not appear to have been as widely used as the other protein source listed. In all cases meat was rarely ever seen as the main part of the meal but was instead used most often as a "flavoring in African cooking."<sup>103</sup> Cattle were seen, not only as a source of food, but also as a source of wealth for centuries. The "Humped Fulani" have been dated as far back as 1,000 AD in West Africa and has always been used as a source of meat protein and dairy products.<sup>104</sup> Al-Bakri made note of a dwarf breed of cattle that held great importance along the Senegal River in Ghana. He also stated that cattle were kept by non-Muslims in Mali for sacrificial purposes. In Sierra Leone cattle were only killed and consumed when ill or when being sacrificed.<sup>105</sup> Although still considered a status and religious symbol by many, beef is consumed in some areas on more regular bases. Hafner listed a popular dish among her recipes titled "Nigerian Beef Stew." This dish included beef, chili

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<sup>101</sup>Gay Cohen, "Groundnut Stew from Sierra Leone," in *The Anthropologist's Cookbook*, edited by Jessica Kuper (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1977), 91.

<sup>102</sup>Dorinda Hafner, *A Taste of Africa: Traditional and Modern African Cooking* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>103</sup>Hafner, 4.

<sup>104</sup> Thurston Shaw, *Nigeria: It's Archaeology and Early History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 68.

<sup>105</sup> Finnegan, 93.

powder, salt, oil, green onions, tomatoes, and tomato paste. The oil was first used to fry the meat and latter was added to the stew as an ingredient. Cornstarch was also browned and used as a thickener in the stew.<sup>106</sup>

Two Arab sources discussed the use of goats as both a source of meat protein and a source of dairy products as does Finnegan in his Sierra Leone report. Al-Idrisi, visiting Senegal, stated that goats were used for both milk and meat. Al-Bakri had a similar impression while in Niger in the eleventh century.<sup>107</sup> Finnegan found goats and sheep being used for sacrificial purposes in Sierra Leone. He also indicated that they were raised as farm animals in Senegal along with hens and pigs.<sup>108</sup>

Many early writers who visited West Africa mentioned poultry. Of Lewicki's Arab sources Ibn Battuta and al-Comari made note of the extensive use of the Guinea Fowl and domesticated hens. Ibn Battuta found women selling hens in Mali. Both al-Comari and Ibn-Buttuta found hens being kept as domestic animals in Mali.<sup>109</sup> Barbot wrote that in Guinea "geese, Guinea Fowl, partridges, wood-pigeons" and many more birds were consumed but it was only in Senegal that he wrote of seeing domesticated chickens being kept.<sup>110</sup>

Fish appeared throughout history to have been the main source of protein in West African countries. Salt and fresh water fish consumption was mentioned frequently by Lewicki's Arab sources as well as Winterbottom, Barbot, and, latter, Finnegan. This fact makes sense considering that most countries considered part of the region known today as West Africa are on the coast and have easy access to extensive river systems. Lewicki stated it very plainly when referring to her sources; "an important part in the nourishment of the medieval population of West Africa was played by fish, both marine and fresh water."<sup>111</sup>

From Senegal both Ibn Sac-id and al-Idrisi wrote about the consumption of fish. Ibn Sac-id, visiting in the thirteenth century, stated the Aulil based their economy on fish caught by using

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<sup>106</sup>Hafner, 142.

<sup>107</sup> Lewicki, 85, 86.

<sup>108</sup> Finnegan, 94, 187.

<sup>109</sup> Lewicki, 90.

<sup>110</sup> Barbot, 71.

<sup>111</sup> Lewicki, 99.

nets. Al-Idrisi, also in Senegal, spent time visiting with a fishing community people he referred to as the “Takrur.” In Niger both al-Idrisi and Leo Africanus mentioned the use of fresh water fish in local diets.<sup>112</sup>

Barbot wrote more extensively about the catching and consumption of seafood in Senegal, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. In writing from Guinea he stated that “the sea abounds in fish of many kinds.”<sup>113</sup> Barbot was restricted to describing the seafood he saw by using names he was already familiar with. This does not mean that the names he gave were correct or that the species were even of the same family, but it does indicate that those he saw were similar enough for him to use familiar, European names. In Guinea he described “mullet of all sizes . . . brill, sea-pike, monk-fish, rays . . . crayfish, and lobster.”<sup>114</sup> In Sierra Leone he again described mullet but indicated that they were different from the European version in that they had “a larger head, and taires which are good.” Barbot also found pike, sardines, and sole in the same area.<sup>115</sup> Both in Sierra Leone and in Senegal he described the people fishing with nets but in Senegal he also wrote that they used lines with hooks and spears. The nets, were woven from rope made of tree and plant remains. The fish were dried on the shores and boiled with rice latter.<sup>116</sup>

Winterbottom’s descriptions of fishing methods in Sierra Leone were much like those of Barbot’s. “The rivers about with a great variety of fine fish . . . different kinds of eels, snappers, mullets, cavaliers, barracootas, ten pounders, sword fish, and sucking fish.” Individuals used hooks and lines to fish with, but locals also went out in-groups of two or more to fish with nets made from palm leaves or grass. Two men would place a pole on each side of a twenty to thirty foot net. This they would weight down and carry out into the ocean as far as they could while still standing, then they would walk back to the shore catching fish in the net as they went.<sup>117</sup>

Once the fish were caught and cleaned, the two methods generally used to prepare them for consumption consisted of stewing or deep firing. Dede’s favorite seafood dish from Ghana

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<sup>112</sup>Lewicki, 99, 100.

<sup>113</sup> Barbot, 71.

<sup>114</sup> Barbot, 72.

<sup>115</sup> Barbot, 246, 265.

<sup>116</sup> Barbot, 100, 276.

<sup>117</sup> Winterbottom, 69, 90.



was a “Fish Stew”. In this dish the fish was first floured and fried in lard. The fish was then removed from the pan, and onions, tomatoes, and peppers were fried. Next the remaining flour was browned. To this was added water and the fish was placed back in the pot with the other ingredients. The stew would have been served with rice or some form of dough.<sup>118</sup>

Several source indicated the importance of the palm tree in the diets of many West Africans, especially those living in and around Sierra Leone. The nuts from palm trees were used to manufacture palm oil and palm nut pulp, both of which were used for cooking while the tree itself was tapped to produce a liquid that was turned into palm wine. The young leaves and bark were used to make nets and as building material. The palm originated in West Africa and, although grows wild, it has been domesticated in some areas. Currently the largest grove of palm trees exists in Nigeria.<sup>119</sup> The trees require both a great deal of moisture and a good amount of sunlight to flourish. This makes them unsuitable for rainforests or dry-land environments. However man-made environments have been created within the rainforest zones to accommodate cultivation.<sup>120</sup> Products from palm trees can be found in soups, stews, sauces, doughs, and condiments.

Only one of the Arab sources thus mentioned referenced to the use of palm oil. Al-Dimashqi discussed its use when he wrote about his visit to the Western Sudan. Both Winterbottom and Barbot, however, wrote about their experiences in sampling palm wine and oil, paying special attention to the wine. Winterbottom recalled that the wine was drawn from the tree about an hour before the sun came up and was sufficiently fermented to be served around midday. He received palm wine from his hosts in both Sierra Leone and Senegal where it was served in a calabash cup; he described this wine as having a “bitter-sweet” taste but pleasant.<sup>121</sup>

Winterbottom wrote in some detail about the process used to make palm wine in Sierra Leone. Nuts from the palm tree were gathered once they had turned red in color. The nuts were beaten until a pulp was obtained and water was added. The mixture was filtered through a bamboo sieve into an iron pot and boiled. The oil was skimmed from the top. Once all the oil

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<sup>118</sup> Dede. 35.

<sup>119</sup> Kiple and Ornelas, Vol.1, 397.

<sup>120</sup> Shaw, 67.

<sup>121</sup> Barbot, 127, 266, 125.

was gathered, the water was drained and the remaining material dried and stored in baskets for use in soups and stews. Winterbottom also enjoyed palm wine that he described as “sweet, remarkable, cool and pleasant, and very much resembles whey in appearance and somewhat in taste.”<sup>122</sup>

Palm oil was an important ingredient in sauces and soups, as well as for frying. A recipe for “A Sauce from Sierra Leone” by Carol P. MacCormack was in the *Anthropologists Cookbook* that turned out to be the ever-popular Palava Sauce. The instructions included palm oil, beef cubs, dried fish, onions, cayenne, chilies, and the green leaves of either the cassava or spinach plant.<sup>123</sup> Dede listed a recipe from Ghana for the same dish. In this version meat, onions, palm oil, tomatoes, salt, and spinach leaves were cooked together to form the sauce.<sup>124</sup> Either version of this sauce could be served with rice or plantain.

Hafner described a dish served on the Ivory Coast that used palmnuts instead of the oil. “Palmnut Soup” would have been a obvious chose in a coastal community because the dish included crabs and smoked fish as well as a fresh fish fillet. Other ingredients in the soup included lamb or beef, a pig’s foot, onions, Palmnut pulp, chilies, and mushrooms. Potato dumplings were also placed in the soup and it would be served with bread; Hafner suggested using plantain bread.<sup>125</sup>

Both Winterbottom and Barbot wrote briefly about cooking techniques used in the areas they visited. Winterbottom stated that foods were either stewed or boiled. West Africans were not afraid to use spices, as Winterbottom wrote of the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, where “the natives . . . are remarkable for seasoning food.”<sup>126</sup> The subsequent soups and stews were served over rice in most cases. Barbot’s descriptions were very similar, but he also witnessed women using a steaming technique in cooking doughs such as couscou balls. Barbot stated that the

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<sup>122</sup> Winterbottom, 59, 62.

<sup>123</sup> Carol P. MacCormack, “A Sauce from Sierra Leone,” in. Kuper, 99.

<sup>124</sup> Dede, 36.

<sup>125</sup> Hafner, 34.

<sup>126</sup> Winterbottom, 65.

women placed the dough balls in pots with holes and these pots were in turn placed over steaming pots for the purpose of cooking them.<sup>127</sup>

Both men wrote of the use of clay pots for cooking, as well as baskets and leather bags for storage. In Senegal Barbot believed that the process for making clay pots must have been learned from the Europeans due to what he perceived as similarities; but, he noted

there is one difference between the production for the pottery produce by the Africans, either because of the clay they use or because of the baking they give it, is much better, and more suitable for quick cooking, than is ours.<sup>128</sup>

These potters also made containers to hold liquids and soups. In Sierra Leone, Winterbottom wrote that blue clay was used to produce pots. These clay pots were left in the sun to harden and then fired using grass or straw as the fuel. While the vessels were still hot, the potter would rub them with a “fine powder” in the absence of being able to glaze them. In Gambia red clay was used that had a very porous texture. For this reason only those items that were to remain dry were stored in these vessels.<sup>129</sup> The use of calabash as a vessel for drinking has already been discussed; however, these gourds were also used for eating vessels and for storage. Ibn Battuta described their use in both the Sudan and Mali where al-Comari stated they were used as storage containers for oil. Ibn Battuta noted that dried pumpkins were used for storage containers among the Walata. This group also used leather bags to store grains.<sup>130</sup> Barbot wrote that food would be served in “gourd or wooden or earthenware bowls.”<sup>131</sup>

Most of the food produced, and the methods used to prepare them, have not changed a great deal in the centuries since the first European contact with the West African coast. Although new items such as maize, cassava, bananas, plantains, and groundnuts have become widely accepted as staple parts of everyday diets, the use of old staples like rice and millet have not diminished in most areas. For example, the harvesting techniques described by Winterbottom in Sierra Leone in the 1790s were almost identical to those described by Finnegan

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<sup>127</sup> Barbot, 122.

<sup>128</sup> Barbot, 101.

<sup>129</sup> Winterbottom, 94, 95.

<sup>130</sup> Lewicki, 133.

<sup>131</sup> Barbot, 122.

in the 1960s. It is also interesting to note that newly introduced foods have simply been incorporated into already existing cooking techniques such as deep frying, boiling, steaming, and stewing as can be seen when comparing the cooking description given by Winterbottom and Barbot to the more current recipes given by Hafner and Dede. Some variations are naturally going to exist across different climate and vegetation zones because these zones allow for the production and harvesting of diverse crops. However, basic foodways have stayed consistent across West African, with few exceptions, through the last four centuries.

## CHAPTER 4

### AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOODWAYS DURING SLAVERY IN VIRGINIA

Much of both family life and community life for slaves in Virginia was centered on two social traits: foodways and religious practices. In studying the cultural development of the Southern United States, one can not help but notice that these two cultural traits have had a strong impact on the development of Southern society. Southern eating and cooking habits were specifically influenced by African-American slaves, who did the majority of cooking on the old southern plantations. The southern economy was based mainly on four staple crops: tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton. Although several food crops might have been grown, each plantation would have chosen one cash crop as their staple. Each slave living on these plantations received provisions of food and clothing based on standards set by the owners with little regard for the needs and desires of the individual. Yet even in a system of assimilation, where individual needs, desires, and tastes were suppressed, slaves managed to supplement their food supplies through gardening, gathering, fishing, and hunting. Combining these additional sources of food with the rations allotted them, slaves quickly developed eating habits and cooking styles that celebrated their African heritage and influenced their Anglo-American owners and neighbors.

George Rawick described provision for the average slave diet to be made up of corn meal, side bacon, and molasses. These provisions seem consistent with slave interviews and narratives. For example, Campbell Armstrong of Arkansas stated that slaves on the plantation where he lived received three pounds of meat, a quart of corn meal, and molasses every Saturday.<sup>132</sup> However, starches could vary from plantation to plantation and season to season and would include potatoes, rice, or corn. Meat was provided in limited quantities and was usually pork in the form of salt bacon, with an occasional allotment of beef or fish. Vegetables were very rarely included in the allotment of rations.

It was not unusual for slaves to be provided with their staple starches such as corn and little else. Corn or maize was the main staple starch used in the upper south and could be

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<sup>132</sup> George Rawick, *Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Connecticut: Bentwood Publishing Company, 1972), 68.

consumed both when green and when ripe. Green corn was prepared by boiling or roasting while ripe corn was usually dried and ground into cornmeal.<sup>133</sup> Mrs. Armaci Adams of Virginia received corn that she roasted in her fire.<sup>134</sup> Josiah Henson, a slave in both Maryland and Kentucky, stated that his rations consisted of cornmeal only from his master with the rare allotment of fish and buttermilk.<sup>135</sup> Charles Crowley, an ex-slave from Virginia, when interviewed by Susie Byrd, stated that he was provided with “cornbread, buttermilk, sweet potatoes, in weekdays.”<sup>136</sup> Rev W. P. Jacobs of Virginia received meals of cornbread and bacon.<sup>137</sup> Charles Ball wrote about his experiences traveling through North Carolina where he met slaves who received only corn for dinner which they ground into meal on the spot and made into ashcakes.<sup>138</sup>

In the upper south, Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee, and North Carolina, ashcakes were a large part of the slave diet and were usually prepared in a similar manner. Ground corn meal was mixed with salt and water and formed into a small loaf. The loaf was placed into an area of the fireplace and ashes were raked into a pile over it. After cooking around the edges, the loaf was placed on a hot brick to cook completely. The loaf could also be wrapped in a large damp vegetable leaf before placing in ashes to add flavor.<sup>139</sup> Mr. Beverly Jones described the steps his mother used to make hoecakes as follows:

Hoecakes was meal mixed with water in a thick batter. Got its name from some of ‘em slaplin’ it on a hoe an’ holdin’ it in de fire

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<sup>133</sup> Sam B. Hillard, “Hogmeat and Cornpone: Foodways in the Antebellum South,” in *Material Life in America 1600-1860*, edited by Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 317.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, Ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Philips (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 155.

<sup>135</sup> Henson’s foodways are analogous to those of Virginia slaves. Rev. Josiah Henson, *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson*, Edited by John Lobb (London: Smith and Company, 1881), 68.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in *The American Slave*, Vol 16, *Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia and Tennessee Narratives*, (District of Columbia: Library of Congress, 1941. Reprinted Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 10.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 155.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains or the Life of an American Slave* (Indianapolis: Dayton and Ashe, 1859), 63.

<sup>139</sup> Rawick, 44.

place tell it's cooked. Mother ain' done that. She used to cook hoecakes in a big iron pan, two or three at a time.<sup>140</sup>

Aunt Susan Kelly, of Virginia, gave the same recipe during an interview, but she stated that her mother first put the loaf on the brick to cook and then placed it in the ashes after it had browned.<sup>141</sup> These rations of corn meal and little else were expected to sustain a slave for at least sixteen hours of hard labor. Although the ingredient for ashcakes and hoecakes were identical, generally speaking, ashcakes were baked in the ashes of the fire while hoecakes were fried in hot grease. However, the terminology does seem to have been used interchangeable with the term hoecake occasionally being used to describe a wheat based breads, but references to the later are rare.

Meat was hard to preserve in the south, particularly in the Deep South, causing it to be in short supply. When protein was provided, it usually consisted of substandard portions like fat pork or small varieties of fish. Charles Ball's supply of meat while he was living in Maryland lasted for only one month out of the year, when the hogs were killed. Ball did receive bacon once a week when it was available.<sup>142</sup> In Virginia slaves could usually obtain fish on their own in the numerous lakes and rivers. Possibly for this reason meat rations recalled by slaves consisted mainly of pork. Bacchus White, from Spotsylvania, recalled hog killing time on his plantation. He stated that three hundred to four hundred hogs would be killed and butchered at the same time. These would be cleaned and hung. Once completely butchered, the meat would be placed in boxes and covered with hickory ashes to smoke.<sup>143</sup> Liza Brown of Sussex indicated that hogs were also hung during the butchering process where she lived. "De would swinge 'em; ole swinge hogs is good eatins', I tell you."<sup>144</sup> Both Levi Pollard and Bacchus White indicated that slaves received less meaty portions in their pork rations. These rations included

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Perdue, Barden, and Philips, 181.

<sup>141</sup> Quoted in *American Slavery*, Vol. 16, 44.

<sup>142</sup> Ball, 17.

<sup>143</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 304,

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 63.

shoulders, jowls, and heads. Pollard stated that these portions where “cut . . . up in square pieces en let hit boil, den put in your salad, or cabbage, or beans, en dey was some kink er good.”<sup>145</sup>

Molasses, one of the most important rations slaves received from their owner, had several important functions for slaves. It was used to make candy for children, as a seasoning to make bland food taste better, as a source of energy for adults, and it could also be made into medicines. Dinah, the mother of the family Ball was placed with in South Carolina, had given him some of the family’s ration of molasses upon his arrival. This molasses was to be consumed as a drink so that he could be rejuvenated after his long, hard journey from Maryland. Ball felt the magnitude of this gift and commented “I well knew that her children regarded molasses as the greatest of human luxuries, and that she was depriving them of their highest enjoyment of afford me the means of making a gourd full of molasses and water.”<sup>146</sup> Sally Brown used the method for making molasses into candy to make cough drops by adding herbs and a little whiskey.<sup>147</sup> The recipe might have been similar to that given by Patricia Mitchell for Molasses Taffy in which she combined molasses, sugar, butter, apple cider vinegar, lemon juice, and a little salt.<sup>148</sup>

Gardens became a central part of a slave’s community and family life. Slaves and owners saw the advantages of gardening, but the importance took different forms. For slaves, gardens had several important functions: they varied and improved the slave’s diet, they produced a commodity that could be exchanged in the slave economy, they gave parents an opportunity to provide for their children, and they brought the family together as a unit.<sup>149</sup> Owners, on the other hand, had different reasons for letting slaves have gardens, which had nothing to do with family unity or a varied diet. First, owners saw the cost effectiveness of allowing slaves to have gardens because most took the opportunity to provide the slaves with fewer basic necessities. Second, owners believed that if slaves were allowed to have gardens the

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 227; also see page 304.

<sup>146</sup> Ball, 131.

<sup>147</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 169.

<sup>148</sup> Patricia B. Mitchell, *Plantation Row Slave Cabin Cooking: The Roots of Soul Food* (Chatham, Virginia: by the author, 1998), 31.

<sup>149</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordon, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974), 535.



plantation would become more like home to them and they would be less likely to run away. Third, owners believed that allowing the slaves to work their own gardens would instill better work ethics that the owners could benefit from on the plantation.<sup>150</sup>

These gardens, also referred to as task grounds, patches, or private fields, could vary in size from plantation to plantation and the types of vegetables grown could vary from region to region. The average garden size was between two and four acres. Octavia George of Louisiana described gardens of between three and four acres, as did Rev. Henson.<sup>151</sup> Barbara Heath, head of Archaeology at Poplar Forest, in Forest Virginia and her co-author Amber Bennett have examined two slave quarter sites, the North Hill site occupied from 1770s-1780s and the Quarter site occupied from 1790-1812. Archaeological excavations of this second site indicated a “yard” area that was 12 feet x 30 feet. The authors have described a “yard” as follows: “the yard is defined here as the area of land, bounded and usually enclosed, which immediately surrounds a domestic structure and is considered an extension of that dwelling.”<sup>152</sup> The area in question included three structures. The first was a duplex dwelling; the second sat thirteen feet northeast of the first and was probably originally a storage building though at some point evidence indicates it was also used as a dwelling. The third building sat fourteen feet northwest of the first structure and was believed to have been another residence.<sup>153</sup> This yard also contained an area near structure one where the soil contained high levels of potassium and phosphorus. This along with irregularities in the soil indicated the existence of a garden. Although there was no direct evidence that this garden belong to the slaves within this community, its proximity to the living quarter and the evidence obtained from excavations of this “yard” along with written records show that slaves living at Poplar Forest did raise garden produce and domestic animals.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Genovese., 539-550.

<sup>151</sup> Rawick, *Sundown to Sunup*, 70; Henson, 30. Also see Betty Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of the Lower Country Georgia* (London: the University of Georgia Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>152</sup> Barbara J. Heath and Amber Bennett, “The Little Spots Allow’d Them: The Archaeological Study of African-American Yards,” *The Journal of the Society of Historical Archaeology*, 34, 2000: 38.

<sup>153</sup> Heath and Bennett, 46. The presence of potassium and magnesium in high levels indicated that a chimney once stood on the site of the third building, leading archaeologists to believe that the building was used as a residence.

<sup>154</sup> Heath and Bennett, 48, 51.

A variety of vegetables could be found in slave gardens, depending on the climate. Sam Hillard in his article “Hogmeat and Cornpone: Foodways in the Antebellum South” wrote that the choice of vegetables depended on the ease of cultivation. With the limited time available to slaves, this theory makes perfect sense.<sup>155</sup> Gardens in Virginia contained vegetables such as potatoes, turnips, collard greens, cabbage, pumpkins, and peas.<sup>156</sup> Other gardens also included beans and sweet potatoes where space permitted.<sup>157</sup> Flootation samples from both the North Hill side and the Quarter site at Poplar Forest revealed the existence of domestic as well as wild fruits, vegetables, and herbs. At the North Hill site four imported grains and two domestic fruits were recovered: oats, rye, wheat, sorghum, strawberries, and peaches. The Quarter site contained samples of maize, beans, sunflowers, wheat, cherries, and peaches.<sup>158</sup> A slave told Charles Ball on a North Carolina plantation that the only variation the slaves received in their diet occurred when the sweet potato crop came in during September and March. Ball found himself in the same situation upon arriving in his new home in South Carolina where rations consisted of ½ bushel corn and ½ gill of salt each week.<sup>159</sup> Charles Crawley of Lunenburg County Virginia listed sweet potatoes along with cornbread, butter, and milk as provision given him by his master. Bailey Cunningham of Franklin county recalled gardens with “cabbage, potatoes, and corn or any other vegetables” being available. Susan Jackson and Mrs. Sarah Wood Johnson both spoke of cabbage as being important ingredients in meals. Levi Pollard also indicated that his owner cultivated peach and apple trees, both of which still grow well in Virginia today.<sup>160</sup> These vegetables were not only cooked into stews and relishes, but surpluses were also sold or traded for other items such as additional clothing, food, and toys for children.

Not only were slaves allowed to grow gardens, but also in some cases they were allowed to raise domestic animals. Lorena Walsh indicated in her work, *From Calabar to Carter’s*

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<sup>155</sup> Hillard, 323.

<sup>156</sup> Rawick, *Sundown to Sunup*, 69.

<sup>157</sup> Ball, 44.

<sup>158</sup> Leslie Raymer and Barbara J. Heath, “African-American Foraging Strategies at a Virginia Plantation, 2000” (photocopy), 4, 6, manuscript on file, Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, Forest. Sample groups were floated in a SMAP (Shell Mound Archaeological Project) with a 1.6 mm mesh.

<sup>159</sup> Ball, 77, 146; a gill is a liquid measure equal to ¼ pint.

<sup>160</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 78, 81, 154, 164, 227.

*Grove*, that Carter Burwell, who became owner of Carter's grove in 1737, allowed or required his slaves to raise hogs, cattle, and horses at the slave quarters.<sup>161</sup> Barbara Heath noted after reviewing the ledger kept by Ann Cary Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's granddaughter, while she resided at Monticello in the early 1800s that slaves on the plantation raised chickens and other garden produce that they sold to the main house.<sup>162</sup> Mrs. Armaci Adams recalled that her owners raised turkeys, making her responsible for them; during the Civil War a soldier shot one of these birds, an act for which she was punished.<sup>163</sup>

Aside from written records, which are minimal, archaeological evidence also exists to support the theory that domestic animals were used as a source of food for slaves. James Deetz noted in his analysis of faunal remains at one slave quarters site on the Flowerdew Hundred plantation, Williamsburg, Virginia, that 10.06% of the remains were pig and 2.65% were from chickens. This was a high percentage for the Tidewater area of Virginia where the chemical makeup of the soil could cause rapid decomposition.<sup>164</sup> Theresa Singleton's work at Butler Island near Coastal Georgia produced beef faunal remains, but her analysis of plantation records also indicated pork, which was likely de-boned and preserved away from the quarter a pattern which seems likely to have applied in Virginia as well.<sup>165</sup>

Even with the limited time available to them, slaves rarely relied on domestic animals as their only source of meat. Most men found the time to hunt and fish either at night or on weekends. Newly arriving African slaves learned quickly the habits of the local wildlife either through observation, from other slaves, or from Native Americans and devised homemade snares and traps to catch animals.<sup>166</sup> Charles Ball set traps on Sunday night to catch rabbits, opossums,

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<sup>161</sup> Lorena Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 120.

<sup>162</sup> Barbara Heath, "Engendering Choices: Slavery and Consumerism in Central Virginia," in *Engendering African American Archaeology*, edited by Amy Young and Jillian Galle (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, in press), 5.

<sup>163</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 3.

<sup>164</sup> James Deetz, *Flowerdew Hundred: The Archaeology of a Virginia Plantation, 1615-1854* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993): 142;

<sup>165</sup> Theresa Ann Singleton, "The Archeology of Afro-American Slaves in Coastal Georgia: A Regional Perception of Slave Household and Community Patterns" (Ph.D. diss. University of Florida, 1980), 175.

<sup>166</sup> Walsh, 90.

and turtles near the plantation he lived on in South Carolina.<sup>167</sup> Rev. Henson recalled slaves in his community catching rabbits, opossums, and other small game.<sup>168</sup> Slaves who lived on plantations near bodies of water frequently went fishing in their minimal spare time. Several slaves including Charles Ball described cooking shad, which he prepared by seasoning the fish with bacon or lard.<sup>169</sup>

Slaves in Virginia had an abundance of wild game to choose from when enough time was available for hunting or fishing. Mrs. Liza Brown fondly recalled eating opossum, rabbits, and wild birds.<sup>170</sup> Simon Stokes enjoyed telling his interviewer, Lucille B. Jayner, hunting stories from when he was a young man on a Virginia plantation. The young men on the plantation where he lived enjoyed opossum hunting in the fall, he stated:

In de fall wen de simmons wuz ripe, me and de odder boy sho' had a big time possum hunting; we all would git two or three a night; and we would put dem up and feed dem hoe-cake and simmons ter git dem nice and fat; den my mammy would roast dem wid sweet taters round them. Dez wuz sho' good, all roasted nice and brown wid de sweet taters in de graby.<sup>171</sup>

Both Robert William and Cornelius Gardner mentioned fishing with Gardner stating “a good eatin’ meal consisted o’ fish or fried meat, ‘lasses an ‘bread.”<sup>172</sup> During his analysis of the excavation of the Wilcox slave quarter, Deetz documented the remains of eighty-eight fresh water mussels that had been caught locally, either in the James or the York River. He noted that 7.40% of the faunal remains from this same site were made up of catfish, also abundant in local rivers.<sup>173</sup> Patricia Mitchell in *Plantation Row Slave Cabin Cooking*, gave a recipe titled “Black Pot Catfish Stew” that was easy to prepare and could have been used with any fish. The stew

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<sup>167</sup> Ball, 160.

<sup>168</sup> Henson, 30.

<sup>169</sup> Ball, 224. For another version of this (to be covered in more detail in the following chapter), see Edna Lewis, *The Taste of Country Cooking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 17.

<sup>170</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 63.

<sup>171</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 281.

<sup>172</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 103

<sup>173</sup> Deetz, *Flowedew*, 142.

included catfish, potatoes, onions, kernel corn, butter, milk, salt, and pepper. First the cook would have boiled and removed the bones from the fish. Then the vegetables and seasonings would have been added to the broth to be cooked. When the vegetables were done, the fish was placed back in the pot and milk was added to the stew if it was available.<sup>174</sup> An excavation of a ravine near Carter's Grove, believed to be a trash dump, revealed oyster shells common at that time in the Chesapeake Bay. Historians believe that these shells were deposited by slaves with the rest of their trash.<sup>175</sup> Patricia Mitchell pointed out in her work that oysters, rolled in cornmeal and seasonings and fried in hot fat, were as popular throughout the coastal south during the antebellum period as they are today.<sup>176</sup>

Slaves also used a form of obtaining food that was practiced by early settlers, West Africans and Native Americans: gathering. It would not have been unusual for slaves to have wandered the fields and woods of plantations looking for wild berries, fruits, nuts, greens, and herbs. Upon their first arrival, most Africans probably located and consumed those things that were similar to plants native in their West African homes. However, slavers soon expanded the number of natural plants they could use either through experimentation, from Anglo-American neighbors, or from the Native American.<sup>177</sup> Dinah, the mother of the family Charles Ball lived with in South Carolina, collected Lamb's Quarter, a wild herb that grew throughout the south, to cook with.<sup>178</sup> In Virginia May Satterfield of Lynchburg recalled her mother telling stories about collecting wild herbs and grasses to help feed her children. "Done heard her say she been in de field 'long side de fence many day an' git creasy [cress] an' poke sallat an' bile it 'dout a speak o' greese an' give it to us chillun 'cause de rashon de white fo'ks lounce fo' de week done give out."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Mitchell, *Plantation Row*, 24.

<sup>175</sup> Walsh, 195.

<sup>176</sup> Mitchell, *Plantation Row Slave*, 22.

<sup>177</sup> John Boles, *Black Southerner: 1619-1869* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 94.

<sup>178</sup> Ball, 116.

<sup>179</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 245.

Evidence of gathering can be found through botanical analysis on soil samples from slave quarter and suspected slave garden sites. Leslie E. Raymer of the New South Association, in conjunction with Barbara Heath, compiled and analyzed soil samples from the two slave quarter sites at Jefferson's Bedford Country home, Poplar Forest. Analysis of both sites yielded evidence of wild taxa. The earlier site, the North Hill site, produced the remains of five wild fruit remains including blackberry, elderberry, grapes, persimmon, and sumac. Also recovered were two nut species along with herbs, grasses, and weeds. The later dated Quarter Site contained three wild fruits including blackberries, grapes, huckleberries, and persimmons. Two nuts taxa were recovered, hickory and black walnut, along with two herbs, goosefoot and smartweed. The percentage of over all natural botanical recovery from each sited was as follows: 28% from the North Hill Site and 21% from the Quarter Site.<sup>180</sup>

In looking at how food was prepared and what utensils were used, historians are left with even less documentation than has been available in studying slave diets. However, through archaeological evidence and slave testimonials, a much clearer perception of slave cooking techniques has begun to emerge. Leland Ferguson's work in the study of Colon-Ware from various archaeological sites across the south has shed a great deal of light on this subject. Ferguson was one of several archaeologists who began to realize that clay fragments being found during archaeological excavations at slave quarter sites previously thought to be manufactured by Native Americans might actually have been produced by African-American slaves. Once this discovery was made, Ferguson began to look at similarities between the pottery being found on archaeological sites and that being produced in modern day West African countries by indigenous people. His research led him to the conclusion that African-American slaves, particularly those located in the Deep South, had retained many of the eating habits of their African ancestors.<sup>181</sup>

As has already been shown, the main staple of every slaves diet was starch in the form of corn or corn meal and when available potatoes. These staple foods would have been familiar to slaves just arriving in the Chesapeake Bay since both had been growing on the West African coast for centuries with maize having been introduced at an early date by the Portuguese. To

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<sup>180</sup> Raymer and Heath, 4, 6.

<sup>181</sup> Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology of Early African Americans* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992), 97.

date, the large earthenware pots used by West Africans to cook rice have not been recovered from any sites in the United States. Although there was little physical proof of the existence of large iron pots being used in the slave quarters, estate records across the south indicated that the majority of slave households were provided with one iron pot for cooking. An inventory from Carter's Grove in 1733 indicated that 100 iron pots and hooks were available at the quarter.<sup>182</sup> Bailey Cunningham of Franklin County, Virginia stated during his interview that his family had "a large iron baker with a lid to bake bread and potatoes and a large iron kettle to boil things in."<sup>183</sup> These pots would have been used for cooking the main, starchy part of the slave diet, acting as a substitute for the earthenware pots. Ferguson also found a large quantity of fragments from smaller earthenware jars and bowls similar to those used by West African cooks for making relishes of vegetables, spices, and occasionally meat or fish. Because slave owners did not provide smaller containers for cooking, slaves either acquired or made these for themselves.<sup>184</sup> The smaller jars had rounded bottoms and smooth lines reminiscent of the West African earthenware jars. Excavations from Virginia to South Carolina show that slaves continued in many areas, like their ancestors, to cook on central open hearths. In these hearths three bricks or lumps of clay were positioned to hold the round-bottomed jars in an upright position. Because the iron pots were capable of cooking quickly at higher temperatures these smaller clay pots would have been used for simmering foods at lower temperatures.<sup>185</sup>

Colon-Ware jars and pots also hold another important clue to slave eating habits, the way they consumed food. The lack of wear marks on the inside of Colon-Ware jars and pots indicates that slaves either used non-abrasive tools for consuming food or they used their hands. Although there has been some indication that gourds, shells, and wooden spoons were used in cooking and consumption, written and archaeological records indicate a much smaller frequency than that of Colon-Ware. This has left many historians with the theory that most slaves consumed their food

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<sup>182</sup> Walsh, 91.

<sup>183</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 81.

<sup>184</sup> Ferguson, 97, 98.

<sup>185</sup> Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 105.

with their hands, in keeping with their ancestral roots.<sup>186</sup> Food would have been consumed either by pinching off some of the main dish and dipping it in the relish or spooning out the main dish in a bowl (usually gourd), ladling the relish over top, and picking up portions with the hands.<sup>187</sup> In Virginia three interviewers recalled gourds being used as ladles or bowls, one recalled using spoons made of wood, while another stated that slaves where she lived used oyster shells for this purpose. Bailey Cunningham stated that soup bowls, called “cymbelin soup bowls” were made from gourds and used to feed the children. Mrs. Sarah Wood Johnson stated “we had a heap of gourds whar you use it back times to drink cool water out of.”<sup>188</sup> She told the interviewer that water drunk from such gourds seemed to taste sweeter and better to her, a sentiment echoed by Horace Muse of Richmond Country. Bailey Cunningham recalled having wooden spoons to eat soup out of his gourd soup bowls with. Mrs. Mary Wood of Fork Union was one of the few interviewees to uphold James Deetz’s theory that shellfish shells were used to scoop up food, stating that slaves on the plantation where she lived used oyster shells for this purpose.<sup>189</sup>

It is important at this point to indicate that slave foodways in Virginia evolved slightly differently. Because of this, it has been presumed by many archaeologist and historians that slaves had chosen a more European style of cooking in the upper south; however, as can be shown from the section on West African foodways, this assumption may have been hasty. The first pottery fragments found on Virginia slave quarter sites by archaeologists were located in Williamsburg and Jamestown and were dated to ca. 1680. These fragments were unglazed, dark colored, and fired at a low temperature just like those described by Ferguson. However, difference in the shape of the pottery appeared quickly, instead of round bottom jars like the ones in South Carolina, here the containers were shallow bowls with “flattened rims and flat bases.”<sup>190</sup> Archaeologists have deduced, from the butchery marks on the faunal remains and the wear marks on pottery fragments, that slaves chose to cook one-pot meals. Patricia Mitchell listed recipes for boiled pig’s feet seasoned with onions, salt, and pepper. Another example of this

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<sup>186</sup>Joyner, 106.

<sup>187</sup> Ferguson, 97.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 81, 164.

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 216, 332.

<sup>190</sup> Deetz., 80; also see 17, 81.



would be stews containing a mix of meats and vegetables cut into small pieces. Mitchell included a brief and easy recipe for *Terrapin Stew*. First the terrapin is boiled until it is soft and then “a small piece of bacon . . . onion, pepper, and butter” are added.<sup>191</sup> A large portion of the meat consumed by slaves and used in these stews would have consisted of wild game and fish.<sup>192</sup> Some wild animals were roasted whole but were still placed in the pot with vegetables such as the opossum dish previously described by Simmon Stokes.

The spices and seasonings used by slaves would have varied from region to region; however, there does appear to be some consistent favorites. Josephine A. Beoku-Betts, a native of West Africa investigating African survivals in foodways on the Gullah Islands, made the following observation:

West African cooking is characteristically well seasoned with salt, pepper, onions, garlic, and smoked meat and fish. Gullah food is flavored with a combination of seasonings such as onions, salt, and pepper, as well as fresh and smoked meats such as bacon, pig’s feet [and] salt pork.<sup>193</sup>

These same spices could be found being used throughout the south, including Virginia. Fat meat was used most often in seasoning vegetables dishes; other frequently used spices included pepper, mace, curry powder, parsley, bacon, onions, and cayenne. A dish that was popular throughout the south, including Virginia, was Hoppin John. The following is a recipe from Mrs. Samuel G. Stoney’s *Carolina Rice Cookbook* as it was reprinted in Hess’ *Carolina Rice Kitchen*: take one pint of Cow (red) peas, one pint of rice, and one pound of bacon. Let the bacon come to a boil in two quarts of water, skim it, add the peas and rice. Boil this until the rice is well swollen and soft and season with red pepper and salt. This dish would have been spiced to taste,

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<sup>191</sup> Patricia B. Mitchell, *Soul on Rice: African Influences on American Cooking* (Chatham: Patricia Mitchell, 1993): 25, 24.

<sup>192</sup> Walsh, 102; also see Table 3, in Dennis J. Pogue, “Slave Lifeways at Mount Vernon: An Archeological Perspective” (1994) <http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/collections/index.cfm/pid/243#table3> (accessed 1 August 2004); Department of Archaeological Research. Colonial Williamsburg, “Archaeology at the Atkinson Site: Enslaved African-Ameircan Foodways,” in *Archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg* (2002) <http://www.history.org/HISTORY/arg/MHPage/AAFoodways.htm> (accessed 1 August 2004).

<sup>193</sup> Josephine A. Beoku-Betts, “We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity Among the Gullah,” *Gender and Society* 9 1995: 547.

but all indications are that slave cooks preferred to make their dishes lively.<sup>194</sup> Other one-pot meals consumed by slaves in Virginia included combinations of cornmeal, vegetables, greens, and pot liquor. Levi Pollard stated that breakfast consisted of mush with dinner being something boiled or fried or a soup. Supper was usually molasses, cornbread, and milk. Bacchus White gave the following instructions for making “mush”

You take boiling water and pour ‘hit o’er cornmeal den let it git  
real cold an’ cut ‘hit ertin pieces, den cook it real brown on a  
griddle.<sup>195</sup>

Milk was poured over the finished product and a mussel shell was used to consume it. Susan Jackson described meals of cabbage, cornbread, and pot liquor. Sarah Wood Johnson Stated that her mother “crumble dis bread in dat good and greasy liquer, put a lot of black pepper in hit and let her steam an little in date ole big skillet.”<sup>196</sup>

At the beginning of Charles Joyner’s ground breaking work, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*, he stated that to understand a community it is first necessary that we understand its “material environment” which includes its food, clothing, and housing.<sup>197</sup> Joyner is correct in his belief that we must understand these areas of the slave community, but historians need to go a step further by studying foodways as a separate category, a social trait as important to our understanding of a society as religion. This is particularly true of slave societies in the Southern United States because of the huge impact of African cultural survivals on Southern culture, and in particular on southern food. T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes reminded readers in their 1980 work *Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia’ Eastern Shore, 1640-1676*, in which they studied the lives of freemen in Northampton Country, Virginia that:

A second assumption running through current writing on race  
relations is that in colonial times, if not in all of American history,  
blacks and whites formed solid, largely self-contained blocs. . . .  
This from of argumentation creates considerable interpretive

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<sup>194</sup> Mrs. Samuel G. Stoney, “Carolina Rice Cook book,” a facsimile reproduction in Karen Hess, *The Carolina Rice Kitchen* (Charleston: n. p., 1901; reprint, Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 61. Following main text with numbering beginning with page 1.

<sup>195</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 227,304.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 304, 154, 164.

<sup>197</sup> Joyner, 97.

problems, not the least of which is that it flies in the face of social reality. . . Since whites and blacks came into regular contact throughout the colonial period, there is not legitimacy to the claim that each group developed cultural and social forms in relative isolation . . . in an analysis of a multiracial society like Northampton, one finds that allegedly sharp racial boundaries were actually blurred and constantly shifting.<sup>198</sup>

African-American, though their own strength of will, adapted what they found in their new environments and maintained, even if in small ways, many of their ancestors' African Cultural traditions. This was no less true of the foods they prepared for themselves and their white masters' tables. Slave cooks became admired not only in Virginia but also across the south for a skilled and imaginative cooking style that combined African cooking techniques with locally grown and harvested foods. These same cooks passed this tradition down not only to their descendants, but also to the descendants of their Anglo-American owners and neighbors. By doing so they developed a style of cooking that turned the bland to the extraordinary and changed the course of Southern Cooking forever.

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<sup>198</sup> T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 22

## CHAPTER 5

### A SHARED FOOD TRADITION

The incorporation of West African cooking techniques did not end with the conclusion of the Civil War, but instead, is still evident in modern day Virginia kitchens. With the ratification of the thirteenth amendment, the structure of southern society changed only slightly. Southerners who had once been slaves, became laborers, often for their previous owners and under conditions that changed little from the antebellum period. The most significant difference was that former slaves had some freedom to move from place to place. Many African-Americans went north or west in search of a better life, but the majority of ex-slaves stayed in the south either as tenant farmers, or more often continuing to work for their former masters as laborers. Masters turned bosses were no longer required to provide the basic necessities of life but instead provided substandard wages in a system where African-American and Anglo-American laborers were competing. Under this new system women hired themselves out as cooks, washerwomen, and housecleaners, often working side by side with their Anglo-American counterparts. These changes left both groups in continued direct contact with one another, and their continued exchange of foodways through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century culminated in a unique Virginia food tradition in the twenty-first century.

Although modern conveniences eliminated the need for homemade utensils or open hearths for preparing and consuming foods, cooking techniques and meal menus have changed little over the past century and a half. Although larger servings of meat have taken center stage, today Virginians still prefer their foods well seasoned with salt, pepper, onions, and pieces of fresh or cured meats. For a better understanding of Virginia cooking techniques, I have chosen to look closely at four individuals, all from families in Virginia. The first three individuals in this survey were all interviewed about their experiences while growing up in Virginia and how their families cooking traditions were handed down to them. They include: Rita Gibson who grew-up in the Shenandoah Valley and currently resides in Charlottesville; Marie Jarvis, a lifetime resident of Crozet, a small town in Central Virginia; and Dr. Dorothy Smith-Akubue Brice who grew-up in Danville and currently resides in Lynchburg. Although a great deal of space appears to have been dedicated to the first informant, Rita Gibson, I have done this in an attempt cover details of meat processing and food preservation that will be eluded to by other

informants, but that will not be explained again. The last person included in this survey published a book concerning her life growing up in a farming community in Virginia. Edna Lewis wrote in vivid detail about her experiences growing up in Freetown, Orange Country, Virginia and the seasonal dishes her mother prepared.

Rita Gibson and Marie Jarvis are distant relatives from a tightly knit extended family. Although these two women grew up in small towns that are a good twenty miles apart, both women spoke of learning to prepare similar dishes that were passed down to them from grandmother and mother to daughter. Gibson's family lived, for the most part, from the produce of their family farm. She stated that she began learning to cook from her mother before she started to school, probably around the age of five or six. "The first thing I learned to cook was a soppy egg in my small frying pan, standing on a chair next to my mom."<sup>199</sup> Gibson's early years of learning to cook, first from her mother and later from her grandmother, were spent with that little frying pan. With it she quickly learned to fry pork chops, chicken, and a variety of other foods. On the family farm a young Gibson learned how to live by the seasons collecting eggs and planting and harvesting fruits and vegetables, butchering and processing chickens and pigs, and gathering wild edible plants. She was taught which of these items could be preserved for winter use and what methods were best used for doing so.

Gardens and orchards were an essential part of the farm. Gibson recalled harvesting and preparing green beans (string beans), squash, corn, all kinds of greens, and tomatoes. Green beans were prepared fresh from the garden or they were canned for the winter. When prepared fresh, Gibson stated they were boiled "with fatback, salt and pepper, and a little sugar." A little sugar went in everything." Beans that were to be canned were processed by first snapping and cleaning them and then packing them in jars raw. Next a small piece of fatback and some salt were added and the jars were filled with water to the rim and boiled. Gibson referred to this process as cold packing. Squash, on the other hand, were hot packed. This process required that the vegetables be cooked some before placing them in a jar with salt, pepper, and sugar. Squash was also sliced and frozen by Gibson's mother, Nancy Shiflett, a process she did not recall

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<sup>199</sup> Rita Gibson, phone interview by the author, 19 April 2004, Charlottesville, Virginia. Written notes. Unless otherwise noted, the quotations which follow are from this interview, and a similar practice will follow for other interviews.

anyone else in the family using. Because freezing caused the slices to become limp, it was necessary to fry them. Gibson remembered enjoying them fried in breadcrumbs and flour.

Corn could be boiled or roasted and prepared on the ear or off. Seasoning corn usually included salt, pepper, and butter. Gibson's family kept cows, both for consumption of beef and to produce milk. With milk cows available, butter was made on the premises with a young Gibson learning to churn around the same time she was learning to fry soppy eggs. Corn would have been added to any dish that contained a mix of vegetables; for example Brunswick stews contained a mix of vegetables along with several kinds of meat. Corn was prepared for winter use in two ways. First it was shucked down to the tender layers of the husk, which was left on, and then frozen. According to Gibson leaving this last layer on "made [the corn] taste like it had just come out of the field." Gibson's aunt also canned corn using the cold packing method, boiling the jars for one hour.

Sense Gibson grew-up in a community where many of her relatives lived nearby, produce and other farm goods were often shared between families. Whether grown by her family or someone else, Gibson recalled that in spring and fall they always had an abundance of tender leafy greens. "Greens were a seasonal thing too. To keep them you had to blanch them then freeze them; they were not as good. The best way was to prepare them fresh with salt, pepper, sugar, and fresh butter." Leaf lettuce was always eaten raw and fresh in the spring and was considered a great treat. Gibson recalled that her "Grandma Satty" would prepare a dressing made of bacon grease, apple cider vinegar, and sugar for this spring salad.

Lima and Butter beans were also grown in the family garden. Both beans were preserved and prepared in the same way. "The beans were boiled in water with butter, salt, and pepper. Just before they were done you added whole milk and corn starch with a pinch of sugar." Today Gibson substitutes evaporated milk because she no longer has access to fresh milk for her Butter and Lima beans.

Fresh grown vegetables that would have found their way into the frying pan on the family farm were green tomatoes, potatoes, and apples. White potatoes were grown on the farm and were preserved by placing them in the cellar covering them with lime. To fry these potatoes, they were sliced and cooked in hot grease with a pinch of parsley, onions, salt, and pepper. Fried green tomatoes were prepared with flour, salt, and pepper. Gibson stated that she later learned the secret of adding sugar to the breading before frying tomatoes from her stepmother. Apples

were kept in a barrel on the covered front porch of the family home. Fried apples were first sliced then prepared by getting “lard really hot and cooking them down with a tiny bit of water. Then you added brown sugar, cinnamon, and a little nutmeg.”

The main part of the family diet on Gibson’s family farm was made up of meat, both fresh and preserved, with the majority of this coming from chicken, pigs, and wild game. Chickens that were several seasons old and past their laying stage were all butchered on the same day. Gibson stated this was, at least in part, due to the terrible smell caused by the hot, wet feathers.

There was a big block of wood where the head was cut off. Then the chickens were hung upside down from a line so the blood would drain. Then they would dress them and freeze them whole. This was so they could be roasted whole later or chopped up.

The most popular way to cook them was to separate the bird and fry it. Gibson’s mother, Nancy Shiflett, would soak the separated pieces in salt water for a few hours to draw out the remaining blood. This also caused some of the salt to adhere to the salt to the chicken. She would mix flour, cornmeal, salt, pepper, and dried parsley in one bowl and eggs and milk in another. When the pieces of chicken were dried off she would dip each in the egg and milk mixture and then in the flour mixture. With this done, the chicken was fried in hot lard rendered from hogs butchered on the farm.

Hogs were all killed and processed on the same day (or sometimes several days in a row) in the fall. As with most southern farm families, no part of the hog went unused and most was persevered for the future. The items rendered from this process were hams (both salted and smoked), fatback, sausage, tenderloin, lard, cracklings, and chitterlings. Large pieces of meat were preserved by smoking and salting and were stored in cellars and smokehouses. When ham was prepared it was usually cooked with pineapples and whole cloves (used as spikes to hold on the pineapple) and cooked in a mustard and brown sugar sauce. Pork sausage and pork tenderloin were both preserved through canning methods. Raw tenderloin was sliced and packed in jars with water, salt, and pepper. Once the leads were placed on the jars, they were boiled for two hours. Later, when the jars were opened, the tenderloin could be fried or baked and the broth would be used to make gravy. Sausage was made into seasoned patties and packed in a

wide mouth jar with no water. These jars were sealed and boiled for two hours. When used the sausage would be fried for breakfast with eggs, biscuits, and gravy.

Chitterlings were made from the intestines of the hogs. The intestines were washed with a high powered hose and chopped into small pieces, about the size of a clam. These pieces were boiled in water infused with salt and pepper, with the water being changed every twenty minutes of boiling time. After the third boil was done, the chitterlings were drained, floured, and fried like chicken. Gibson described the finished product as being “like clams in consistency.”

The family cornbread recipe passed down to Gibson included another item produced on the day hogs were butchered, cracklings. When available, cracklings were always included in the cornbread along with corn meal, flour, baking powder, and milk or buttermilk. Cracklings are made from the skin and the layer of fat right under the skin. “The hogs were scraped and scalded and everything cooked down. Then the cracklings were squeezed in a press to render lard. The cooked and pressed cracklings were then frozen and used in cornbread.”

Pork liver and pig’s feet were two other favorites prepared in the fall and winter. Liver was breaded much like chicken and fried with onions. Even with the health concerns surrounding the consumption of liver, Gibson stated that once every couple of months she had to have a dish. Pig’s feet were cooked fresh or preserved by pickling them. Raw, clean feet were placed in jars with vinegar brine (vinegar, salt, and sugar) and cooked for four hours. Although the entire family enjoyed them this way, Gibson stated “the best way we loved them was boiled with salt and pepper. Just before they were done we added potatoes; and just before the potatoes were done we would add dumplings made of biscuit dough.”

Spring and fall were looked forward to because of those special delights that only nature could bring to the table. At an early age, Gibson, her two brothers, and her cousins learned to look for and collect the wonderful wild fruits and vegetables that could be found on their farm. She has fond memories of the fresh wild asparagus that only grew in early spring. “We just steamed them in water with butter and I remember them tasting so good.” The kids were also assigned the enjoyable task of picking wild berries of every description. Of the ones that were not eaten during picking, some were canned, some went into pies, and some into wine.

In the fall during hunting season, deer and wild turkey were also on the table. Deer was usually processed and prepared like beef. There was one exception, however, the tenderloin. Deer tenderloin was processed and canned the same way that pork tenderloin was. Wild turkey



is still a favorite of Gibson's "I remember wild turkey as being slender and gangly looking, but so good. We roasted it the oven and sensed it was a special treat we fixed all the trimmings." Squirrels and rabbits were the other wild game that found a place on the family table during hunting season. This made fall the best time to make Virginia's famous Brunswick Stew, which can be made with chicken and pork but in the past the chicken was replaced with squirrel or rabbit. Added to these meats were vegetables such as peas, carrots, and potatoes with the broth being thick and brown. Although tomatoes could be added, they were not the base of this stew.

Staples that were purchased from the store were flour, cornmeal, rice, grits, okra, fish, and on special occasions oysters. Flour and cornmeal were used to make cornbread (flour biscuits were also made). Besides crackling bread, Gibson was also taught to make Hoecake and corn pudding. For Hoecake the cornmeal and flour were made into a "biscuit type batter and put into sizzling hot lard in an iron skillet and cooked in the oven." To make corn pudding Gibson used "canned corn, cornmeal, lots of eggs, and lots of sugar." She also made bread pudding by combining stale bread, cream, vanilla, sugar, and eggs, which made custard that the bread absorbed. Once all ingredients were mixed together it was baked in the oven, the outcome being this "yummy custard pudding." Cakes and pies were for Sunday, but bread pudding could be desert on any day. Grits were bought in sacks like flour and were a breakfast food. Rice was also purchased as a second stable starch as sometime served as a cereal.

Oysters were purchased but only on special occasions. Gibson recalled oysters only coming into the house at Christmas time as a rare delicacy. Fried oysters were prepared the same way chicken and fish were; only flour was replaced with cornmeal. The process for making oyster stew has been a family secret until recently; Gibson agreed to share the recipe with me, although I suspect she still held something back. Included in the stew are oysters with their broth, a stick of real butter, salt, pepper, milk, and "a little dash of cream of tarter." The broth was brought to a light boil and then all of the other ingredients were added.

Many of the recipes and family traditions passed down to Gibson by her mother and grandmother were also passed down to her distant relative, Marie McAllister Jarvis. Thirteen years Gibson's senior, Jarvis grew up approximately twenty miles away in a small town in central Virginia. When Jarvis was a small girl, her parents, Ellis and Nelly Conley McAllister, moved from their family home on Buck Mountain to the small community of Crozet. Nelly McAllister would soon become known among both family and friends as one of the greatest

cooks in Crozet. Ellis McAllister and his brother Lee had chosen to build their homes directly across from each other on Buck Mountain Road (today Buck Road). The brothers had married two sisters, Nelly and Mitty Conley, and the close proximity of their homes allowed their children to grow up together and share in each others daily lives. Several other brothers, sisters, and cousins also took-up residence throughout the area, separated in many cases by only a few miles. This made it easy for this closeknit family to spend time cooking, eating, talking, playing, and praying together. An added influence for Jarvis was her maternal grandmother who came to live with her parents when Jarvis was a little girl. This gave her the opportunity to learn from both mother and grandmother and made their house a place for family gatherings on Sundays after church and on holidays. "I guess because Grandma was here everyone came here on Sunday after church. For three years everyone came to Sunday dinner."<sup>200</sup> Many of Jarvis's favorite memories center around those Sunday and holiday gatherings, and she shared some of her memories of those occasions, including many of her family's favorite dishes.

Although the property Marie Jarvis's family lived on was not large enough for a fully working farm, Ellis McAllister made sure he provided his family with the fresh vegetables, meats, and milk products they enjoyed. Known as Daddy Ellis to many of the children his wife baby-sat, Mr. McAllister was an avid gardener who kept his 1/2 acre plot filled with an assortment of vegetables that were eaten fresh, dried, and canned. Green beans were favorite that were both grown and purchased and although often cooked fresh, they could also be canned or dried. Dried green beans (or hay beans) were a Christmas time delicacy in the McAllister house because that was the only time they were cooked. Preparing hay beans for storage was not an easy task. First, Mr. McAllister had to build a scaffolding to keep animals away. The beans had to be cleaned and snapped and laid out on a sheet in the sun to dry, being taken in at night or when it rained. Once dried ("tell they rattled"), they were washed, dried, and packed in jars to be frozen. Whether the beans were fresh, canned, or dried, they were cooked the same way; boiled with fatback, salt, and pepper and served with chopped onion and cornbread. Lima beans and butter beans were occasionally grown but also bought. Both were purchased dried and boiled tell tender. Then butter, a little sugar, salt, pepper, and fresh cream were added.

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<sup>200</sup> Marie Jarvis, phone interview by the author, 17 April 2004, Crozet, Virginia. Written notes. Unless otherwise noted, the quotations which follow are from this interview.

Greens were almost always cooked fresh in the spring and fall and included collards, mustard, turnip, and “cressy salad” (or crest). These were picked and placed in paper sack to be carried into the house. Jarvis stated “mama always looked at each leaf on both sides, then she washed them twice and cooked them with fatback until they were tender, with salt and pepper. Sometimes she would add a tinny bit of sugar.”

Along with gardening and keeping a mild cow to produce fresh milk and butter, the McAllisters also kept hogs. Jarvis recalled the time when the smokehouse setting on their property was used by her father to cure and store meat after being butchered and processed in the fall. “He went out and sliced of strips of shoulder or ham. I called it newspaper meat cause he would bring in to mama in newspaper. He also had a trunk or meat box he put salt in and slices of ham.” Mrs. McAllister canned sausage and tenderloin using the same methods mentioned above. She also cooked pig's feet but was very particular about how they were cleaned.

Mama said she would only eat pig's feet she had cleaned. Daddy would first clean and scrap them with a razor outside. She would clean and scrap them again. She would boil them in water until tender with salt and pepper.

Cornbread accompanied almost every meal in the McAllister household except breakfast. The recipe for cornbread was a standard one used throughout the south and included cornmeal (sometimes with flour), eggs, sugar, milk, or buttermilk. This was baked in a hot, greased pan in the oven. The idea that “the grease needed to be good and hot before pouring in the cornmeal” made the bread seem both fried and baked. “Mama only fried corn cakes [on top of the stove] when Carol came over because he loved them that way.”<sup>201</sup> Although Jarvis recalled her grandmother talking about crackling bread, she did not remember ever having it at home.

Corn puddings and bread puddings were also family favorites. Jarvis's mother's corn pudding consisted of cornmeal, milk, butter, salt, and pepper. To make her bread pudding, Jarvis stated that you had to “fill a baking dish ½ full of milk. Then add ½ to a cup of sugar, two eggs, vanilla flavor, broken bread, and bake.”

Many of the dishes still frequently found in the McAllister/Jarvis kitchen include favorite fried dishes like fried chicken potatoes and green tomatoes. Like Nancy Shiflett, Rita Gibson's mother, Mrs. McAllister soaked her chicken in salt water, often overnight, before cooking. Next

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<sup>201</sup> Carol Conley is Marie Jarvis first cousin.

she would drain, rinse, and dry the pieces. She would heat oil or lard “good and hot in a pan, add a stick of butter, and flour each piece of chicken.” Green tomatoes were sliced, dipped in beaten eggs, rolled in flour, sugar, salt, and pepper, and fried in hot oil. Marie stated that her mama put sugar in everything included her fried white potatoes that were cooked with onions, salt, pepper, and sugar.

Both Marie Jarvis and Rita Gibson have attempted to keep their family cooking tradition alive (although with some health conscious changes) by passing on recipes and techniques to their daughters, and in Jarvis’ case to her son as well. However, the one thing that cannot be passed on, except through oral history, are the experiences gained from families coming together on a regular bases to share in these wonderful meals. Upon completing her interview, Gibson stated that she was going to contact her mother and thank her for those experiences. Jarvis stated that her biggest regret was that her daughter and son “missed out on the family,” or the experience of having so many members being a continual part of ones life.

Dr. Dorothy Smith-Akubue Brice was born Dorothy Ann Robinson in Danville (Pittsylvania County), Virginia September 1945, the ninth of ten children. Dr. Akubue’s father died when she was very young leaving ten children to grow-up in a strong matriarchal family. Her mother always worked, first as a mill worker and later as a laundress at the memorial hospital (now the Danville Regional Medical Center). Ms. Robinson raised her family within the township of Danville, “the last capital of the Confederacy”, where she taught her children to be self-sufficient and to work hard.<sup>202</sup> These lessons became very important to a young Dorothy Robinson who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement. She stated “I participated in my share of set-ins, meetings, and marches.” There were two things she remembered best about that time. The first was the opportunity she had to see Dr. Martin Luther King when he came to Danville on March 26, 1963. The second was that for the first time in her life she learned what true fear was. Dr. Akubue would later marry, raise a son, work her way though collage and graduate school, study abroad in Kenya, and become the first African-American, and the first women, to chair the History Department at Lynchburg College in Lynchburg Virginia. In all her experiences, many of her fondest memories are of family gatherings and the wonderful foods served up in a kitchen where food was often a scarce commodity.

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<sup>202</sup> Dr. Dorothy Robinson Smith-Akubue Brice, phone interview by the author, 20 April 2004, Lynchburg, Virginia. Written notes. Unless otherwise noted, the quotations which follow are from this interview.

In a family of ten children, whatever food was available had to go a long way, “I was raised on Pinto Beans, fresh bread, molasses, and sweet water. We didn’t have cool-aid, it was water and sugar.” The first thing Dr. Akubue learned to cook was bread, which usually took the form of biscuits or hoecakes. Unlike the hoecakes referred to in most areas of the south, these were made from white flour, water, and lard. She stated that it was her brother John who taught her how to make bread. “All my brothers could cook, mother was working and they took care of us.” Often this bread was eaten with molasses, a combination that at times made up the entire meal. With the hoecakes, Dr. Akubue recalled that there was almost always a pot of plain Pinto Beans on the stove, sometimes with sugar and tomatoes to add variety.

Vegetables like green beans, potatoes, yams, cabbage, tomatoes, and greens also showed up on the Robinson family table. Green beans and potatoes were often boiled together with a peace of pork, salt, and pepper in them. When available these would be served with slices of tomato. Potatoes were also fried in lard with onions. Greens included collards and mustard, sometimes mixed with spinach, boiled in a large pot with pork. Cabbage cut in chunks was also boiled with pork, salt, and pepper

On special occasions, yams and apples might be added to the menu either prepared from fresh produce or, in the case of yams, canned. A sauce was always prepared to go with yams. Dr. Akubue stated that her favorite way to prepared yams was with pineapples. This recipe included the juice from one can of pineapples mixed with water, sugar, and orange juice. This mixture was poured over the yams and pineapples before cooking. When pineapples were not available, a sauce of sugar and water or brown sugar and water would suffice. Sometimes sweet potatoes were purchased fresh and baked by placing them directly in the ashes of the oven. These would be eaten plain or with butter if it was available and were described as being very sweet. Apples were also purchased, usually in the summer or fall, and were eaten fresh or fried. “Sometimes in the summer mother would go to the store and get apples. We would cut them, cook them down with sugar, and have them with biscuits.”

Sources of meat protein came from much the same places as the other southern households discussed so far: pork, chicken, eggs, and fish. Dr. Akubue stated that “black people choose meat first, then doubled back and choose vegetables.” Fish were fried or baked in much the same way that chicken was prepared with the exception being that fish were rolled in cornmeal instead of flour. Salt and pepper were added to the cornmeal before the fish were

rolled. Pork was not only used as a seasoning in vegetables but was also consumed as a main dish. Neck bones and beans served with cornbread were a favorite meal. The neck bones were boiled in a separated pot before being served together. Chitterlings were boiled and seasoned with salt and red pepper and also served with cornbread. Slabs of bacon were purchased, sliced, and fried for breakfast often being accompanied by biscuits and molasses.

As with many southern households, Sunday dinner was a special event in Dr. Akubue's family. The menu for this occasion usually consisted of fried chicken with brown gravy, yams, cornbread, potato salad, and/or slaw. But whatever the side dishes were, the main course was what was looked forward to with the most anticipation. A whole chicken was prepared for this occasion. The bird was carved, washed, rolled in butter, salt, pepper, and flour, and fried in lard. Gravy was made in an iron skillet by combining lard and flour. "You sift in flour and take your fork in a circular motion until well mixed with lard. How much oil depended on how much gravy you wanted and you browned it according to your meat." Dr. Akubue's mother never made white gravy and she does not recall ever having gravy for breakfast as is common in the south today. Even now she considers fried chicken and gravy to be the appropriate Sunday dinner.

Desserts consisted of everything from fruits and ice cream to puddings. Ice cream was usual purchased and was almost always strawberry because it was Ms. Robinson's favorite. Pound cake was popular and easy to make and could be accompanied by a variety of fruits including apples, oranges, and bananas. Raisins were kept in the house and were included in the Christmas treats along with apples and oranges. Bread and rice pudding were made when stale bread or extra rice was available. Bread pudding consisted of sugar, milk, eggs, and vanilla with leftover bread. It is interesting to note that in Dr. Akubue's family home eggs were not considered a breakfast food. "Eggs were used only for special dishes," the breakfast menu would have consisted of biscuits and molasses or rice served with sugar, butter, and milk, with the occasional addition of bacon. Rice pudding was made in a similar way but with raisins and substituting rice for bread.

Dr. Akubue learned little about cooking (except the making of bread) until she was married and away from home. Her chores in her childhood home consisted of cleaning and moving furniture while other siblings, often her brothers, did the cooking. With a mother who worked long hours, the children were determined that when she arrived home, Ms. Robinson

would be able to “set and relax.” However, whether or not she learned to cook at home, it is obvious that Dr. Akubue remembered well the food cooked in her family kitchen and the important relationships that developed around special meal and social events. “If we get together we have food. Families get together around meals, around food. If there is a wake or a funeral people eat, drink, and socialize. People take food to help and people eat food.”

Edna Lewis, the last of the southern women covered in this paper, was a renowned cook and author of several cookbooks. She wrote *The Taste of Country Cooking* in an attempt to preserve her family heritage and a way of life that she believed was being lost. Lewis grew-up in Freetown Virginia, a community founded by ex-slaves, including Lewis’s grandfather, in Orange County Virginia. According to Lewis each year

Seemed to be broken up by great events such as hog butchering, Christmas, the cutting of ice in winter, springtime with its gathering of the first green vegetables and the stock going away to summer pasture, the dramatic moments of wheat threshing, the excitement of revival week, race day, and the observation of emancipation day.<sup>203</sup>

With this in mind Lewis set out to preserve the special meals that were important parts of these events. Although only select recipes are included in this chapter, Lewis attempted to preserve her family and community heritage by showing that, through food, history could be preserved and passed down.

As in the previous households discussed, cornmeal found an important place in the Lewis family kitchen. The recipes included in her writings were ones for cornbread, crackling bread, and spoon bread. Cornbread was made from cornmeal, eggs, lard, butter, and buttermilk. This mixture was poured into a pan of hot oil and baked in the oven. Sometimes extra lard was added, causing the edges of the cornbread to become crunchy. “When cooked, the corner pieces of bread would have a lacy, crisp edge and there would be quite a bit of competition for those pieces when it was placed on the table” (Lewis 1997, 189). A favorite cornbread dish was Crackling Bread which simply included adding cracklings to the above cornbread recipe. During hog butchering “when the lard was rendered and strained, little defatted pieces were left . . . [these were] cut into small pieces and mixed into the cornmeal batter” (Lewis 1997, 183). She

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<sup>203</sup> Edna Lewis, *The Taste of Country Cooking*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), xv. (For the quotations from this book which follow, page numbers are indicated in parentheses following the quotation.)

described the outcome as bread that was “deliciously crispy and chewy” (Lewis 1997, 183). Another delicious bread containing cornmeal was spoon bread. This recipe, again, called for white cornmeal, salt, sugar, baking soda and powder, eggs, butter, and buttermilk. However, the amount of cornmeal is cut in half compared to cornbread, sugar is added and the amount of butter is tripled.

Yeast bread and biscuits were the other two types of bread recipes included in Lewis’s book. Lewis noted that the key to making a good yeast bread were a warm kitchen and the rising of the dough. The ingredients included white flour, sugar, salt, yeast, milk, water (lukewarm and cold), lard, and whole-wheat flour. Lewis recommended that if the kitchen was not warm enough for the dough to raise properly, warm water could be placed under the bread rack to help it rise. Yeast rolls were made from a similar recipe except freshly mashed potatoes were added to the batter and wheat flour was excluded. These potatoes were first boiled and mashed and then mixed with a little of the water they were boiled in. Biscuits were made with flour, salt, baking soda and powder, lard, and buttermilk.

Seafood of any kind would be considered a special delicacy in the Freetown community and both shad and oysters held special memories for Lewis. “Because shad was practically the only fish we ever ate and spring was the only time it was ever seen, we were always much too excited to wait for dinner, so we’d cook it for breakfast whenever it was caught” (Lewis 1997, 17). The fish were “pan-fired” with roe by first cutting them into four-inch pieces and then soaking them in salt water for about a half an hour. Then the pieces were coated in a mixture of cornmeal, pepper, and salt. Once coated, Lewis suggested leaving them set for a time so that the cornmeal had “time to adhere to the fish” (Lewis 1997, 18). When this was done, the fish would be fried in a hot frying pan of pork fat. This breakfast would have also included bacon, eggs, corn pone, preserves, honey, coffee, and, if guests were present, dandelion wine.

As was previously noted, oysters were usually served at Christmas and could be prepared in one of two ways, stewed or fried. Remembering her anticipation as a child on Christmas morning, Lewis wrote of dinner the night before “we wouldn’t eat much more than the oyster stew made from the first oysters of the season and crisp biscuits” (Lewis 1997, 199). Her oyster stew recipe consisted of oysters (drained), butter, milk, heavy cream, cayenne, nutmeg, salt, and parsley. The oysters were first cooked in a pan with melted butter “until they beg[a]n to curl” (Lewis 1997, 200). When done, milk was added. Then the entire content of the pan was moved



to a saucepan where the remaining ingredients were added. Christmas morning found oysters moved out of the sauce pan and back into the frying-pan. Eggs and peanut oil were mixed in a bowl with a cup of cracker meal scattered on a sheet of wax paper beside it. Each oyster was dipped in the liquid mixture first and then placed in the meal. Once breaded, the oyster were fried in a preheated frying pan of lard. Eggs, sausage, biscuits, fried potatoes, and coffee made wonderful compliments to these oysters.

Lewis parents also grew and processed their own hogs and chickens “hog killing was one of the special events of the year and generally took place in December” (Lewis 1997, 181). Much like planting and harvesting, hog killing day brought together many Freetown neighbors. From this event many of the food products necessary to several of the families living in Freetown were produced. Not only were hams, sausage, and bacon produced but also lard was rendered and the pieces of salt and smoked pork used for seasoning were also obtained. Ham could be prepared boiled, or boiled then baked. Smoked shoulder, although usually reserved as a seasoning for vegetables and beans, could also be boiled and served. Spareribs were prepared by first parboiling them. After this was done they were marinated in a mixture of brown sugar, honey, soy sauce, salt, sherry, chili sauce, ginger, and garlic. The ribs were then baked in the oven and a glazed with soy sauce and honey was added.

Lewis gave two recipes for fried chicken, Virginia Fried and Pan-Fried with gravy. The recipe for Virginia Fried was included in a menu for a “Midsummer Sunday Breakfast” (Lewis, 1997, 75). Lewis stated that it was from this time of year that some of her favorite memories came.

Our barefeet had become completely toughened and comfortable as we sat and quietly relaxed on a long bench behind the table where a platter of hot fried chicken rested, along with fried vegetables such as corn or cymplings, sausage cakes, biscuits, batter bread or cornmeal muffins, jelly, or preserves, coffee, and well water or milk for the children (Lewis 1997, 75).

To make Lewis’s Virginia Fried Chicken you needed white flour, wheat flour, salt, pepper, lard, butter, and a slice of smoked ham for flavoring. First the two flours, salt, and pepper were mixed together. Pieces of chicken were rolled in this mixture and fried in hot lard, seasoned with pork and butter, at a high temperature (Lewis 1997, 76). Pan-fried chicken did not require breading but was still fried in lard and butter in a hot pan. This technique “produces a deliciously crispy

outside with just the right amount of moisture inside – never wet at the bone” (Lewis 1997, 104.) Smoked pork also was added to the frying pan “for flavor” in this dish (Lewis 1997, 105). Gravy was produced by adding flour to a small amount of leftover grease, browning it, and adding sweet cream.

Vegetables of every description were grown on the farm and prepared fresh or from canned produce. Lima beans were prepared with heavy cream, butter, salt, and pepper. Green beans were boiled with “cured, smoked pork shoulder or bacon,” salt, and pepper (Lewis 1997, 124). These same seasonings were used when boiling greens such as kale, mustard, or watercress. “The most delicious cooked greens we made were cooked with pork, except for spinach, and we usually served them with white sauce” (Lewis 1997, 174). Cabbage was also prepared by boiling it with pork shoulder but this recipe also called for fat from bacon, green scallions, and black pepper. Lewis noted that the first cabbage plants did not come in until wheat-threshing day. Because this was a community event, her mother

would cut up many heads and cook them in a large iron pot with the liquid from the pork shoulder and a small amount of fat seasoning. Cabbage cooked that way was hearty fare, good sustenance for hard-working men (Lewis 1997, 106).

Potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and wild asparagus were all fried on top of the store. Tomatoes were breaded in flour, bread crumbs, salt, pepper, and brown sugar and were fried in bacon fat or butter. White potatoes were also fried in butter with only salt and pepper as were sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes were also fried after having been boiled and allowed to cool. Lewis stated that she preferred them fried after being peeled raw. “Fried sweet potatoes were as popular as white and the flavor always seemed enhanced by frying. We enjoyed them most served for breakfast or with a light supper” (Lewis 1997, 56).

Lewis mentions a number of desserts in her work including two popular standards that have already been mentioned, corn and bread pudding. Lewis stated that “bread pudding and other custard dishes were popular in the early spring because of new calves and green grass producing extra pails of milk, and a good way to use up some of the stale bread was to make bread pudding” (Lewis 1997, 48). Lewis’s bread pudding consisted of dry bread, butter, eggs, sugar, milk, vanilla, nutmeg, raisins, and cubed sugar. She recalled entering the kitchen on days when her mother would make the pudding and smelling the aroma of “rich . . . butter and nutmeg

rising from layers of bread that were submerged in a custard of rich milk, fresh country eggs, and plump raisins” (Lewis 1997, 48). If bread pudding was a springtime favorite, then corn pudding took its place in the summer time. This dish was prepared with the first corn of the season and included sugar, salt, eggs, milk, butter, and nutmeg and was always “served with sweet potato casserole” (Lewis 1997, 122).

In showing a shared food tradition between African-American and Anglo-American Southerners, I have confined myself to a discussion of basic foods and everyday recipes. Of the households discussed, three obtained large portions of their food supplies from their own production while the fourth purchased its foods commercially. Items produced by the Gibson, Jarvis/McAllister, and Lewis households included fruits, vegetables, and meats; these included green beans, squash, corn, greens, tomatoes, lima and butter beans, and potatoes. Protein items produced for consumption consisted of products obtained from the butchering of farm grown hogs and chickens. Eggs would also have been included under this category. Gibson and Lewis were the only subjects to mention wild game as an important component in their diets. These items included deer, wild turkey, and fish. Dairy products included milk and butter, both of which were produced on site by the Gibson, Lewis, and Jarvis/McAllister families. Items purchased included cornmeal, molasses, rice, grits, okra, fish, and oysters. The Lewis family was an exception to this rule because they resided in a community that grew wheat and that could process it into flour at local mills. In the case of Dr. Akubue’s family, all items were purchased locally. However, foods consumed by her family were consistent with those consumed by the other three.

The processing and preserving of food by the three families who produced much of their own were also consistent. Hogs were butchered and processed in identical fashion in the fall of the year. This process produced several different cuts of meat including pig’s feet, bacon, side meat, ham, chitterlings, and cracklings. Meat from this process was preserved through canning, freezing, smoking, or salting. Chickens, on the other hand, were only preserved through freezing. Most vegetables were either canned or frozen. Gibson, Jarvis, and Lewis all mentioned using vegetables that had been canned, although Lewis did not give specifics about the process of canning on site. In all cases, root vegetables and apples were preserved by storing them in a cool, dry place.

The use of food as a basic ingredient in social events and the coming together of family also appear as a common theme among informants. Both Jarvis and Akubue spoke of the importance of food in bringing families together during holidays and on Sundays after church. Lewis wrote about the special meals prepared when seasonal food items became available and when neighbors came together to accomplish tasks such as hog killing time.

Although there were some variations in these recipes between subjects, that is not an uncommon occurrence. Variations in recipes often occur even within the same family. For example, Gibson's mother did not include sugar when frying green tomatoes but Jarvis did. However, the basics in each dish discussed were consistent throughout the subjects. Chicken and pork made up the bulk of the meat proteins. Deep frying was the preferred method for cooking better cuts of meat, poultry, and fish with the latter two being either breaded or battered before being placed in a heavy amount of hot lard and butter. Potatoes, tomatoes, and apples were also fried in hot oil in all four households. Corn bread recipes were also identical with the only variation occurring with the addition of crackling. In each case cornbread was either fried or baked in hot oil. Both Lewis and Jarvis gave similar recipes for both corn and bread pudding, while Akubue listed only bread pudding being made in her household. In all cases foods were seasoned with heavy amounts of pork, salt, pepper, and onions.

Although the cooking techniques and recipes thus far discussed have their origins in Virginia, such incredible foods could not be sustained within the geographic boundaries of the southern states forever. With the end of the Civil War and the African-American migration north, so too went one key aspect of African-American culture held dear to these ex-slaves and their children, their foodways. Out of this cultural move a food tradition developed, first in the north and later in the west, known as Soul Food. Today Soul Food restaurants exist in almost every large city across the United States and many small towns as well. Two restaurant owners, one in California and the other in New York, produced excellent cookbooks that represent this African, and American, food heritage found in Virginia and elsewhere.

LaMont Burns wrote *Down Home Southern Cooking* in 1987. In the introduction of this work Burns discusses his close relationship with his mother and grandmother while growing up. "My grandmother, Ausiebelle, and my mother, Thelma, were both cooks and I was literally

raised on the endless conversations about my famous great-grandmother, Lucinda Macklin.”<sup>204</sup>

It appears that Burns’s great-grandmother was a slave in a well-to-do Tennessee household. As such, Lucinda Macklin acquired a reputation for being an incredible cook, a gift that she passed down to her great-grandson. Many of Lucinda’s best recipes and her techniques for preparing them were taught to Burns by his grandmother, along with a great deal of history concerning his ancestors and his southern roots. With that in mind, and with some prodding from his mother, Burns spent several years living in the south before moving to California to open “LaMont’s Authentic Barbecue” in Encinitas California. The following are just a few of the recipes handed down to Burns and found in his cookbook.

Corn pudding, cornmeal mush, corn fitters, and hoe cakes were the main recipes that included that time honored staple ingredient, cornmeal. Cornmeal mush included meal, boiling water, and salt. This mixture was first cooked in a double broiler and then allowed to cool in a refrigerator. Next, it was cut into strips, fried, and served with maple syrup and sausages. Corn pudding was another menu item, this version included yellow cornmeal, salt, paprika, milk (cold and scalded), bacon fat, fresh corn, eggs, either red or green peppers, pimentos, or parsley. Cornmeal was also made into corn fitters and hoecakes. To make fritters, spoonfuls of dough were dropped into hot fat and fried. Hoecakes were fried like pancakes on a hot griddle. Both of these were served for breakfast with some type of pork. Burns’s recipe for crackling bread included a standard cornbread recipe, but with a few twists. The recipe included white meal, wheat flour, baking soda, salt, sour milk, cracklings, and cloves or honey.

Burns also mentioned both lima beans and green beans. His lima beans were prepared with bacon fat, salt, milk, and cream. Green beans were boiled with diced potatoes, bacon, salt, pepper, celery seed, and onions. The potatoes were used to gauge cooking time for green beans. When the potatoes were tender the beans were done.

Burns included many recipes for pork in his work. For example, aside from seasoning, there were recipes for both chitterlings and scrapple. Burns explained that chitterlings were small intestines processed during the butchering of hogs, which agreed with our previous informants. These he would cut and “boil with cloves and red pepper” (Burns 1987, 93). Next

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<sup>204</sup> LaMont Burns, *Down Home Southern Cooking*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1987), xi. (For the quotations from this book which follow, page numbers are indicated in parentheses following the quotation.)

he dipped the slices in eggs and bread crumbs and fried them. Scrapple, under the title “Lucinda’s Scrapple”, was described as “the small amount of meat and fat clinging to the bone” (Burns 1987, 98). The entire bone was simmered in hot water until all the meat came loose. Next “salt, pepper, onions, and sugar” were added to the broth and cornmeal was stirred in. The meat was added to this and the mixture was allowed to cool. Then it was sliced and fried.

The recipes for oysters included stewed and fried. His oyster stew contained oysters with their broth, milk, butter, parsley, onion, salt, and pepper, a recipe almost identical to Gibson’s version. The oysters were placed in a saucepan in their own juice with the remaining ingredients added after the oysters were cooked. To make Ausiebelle’s Fried Oysters, the following ingredient were necessary eggs, salt, pepper, celery seed, flour, cracker crumbs, and butter. First, “eggs, salt, pepper, and celery seed were combined” (Burns 1987, 146). Next, the oysters were dipped in flour, then the egg mixture, then the bread crumbs, and lastly, they were fried in butter” (Burns 1987, 146).

*Sylvia’s Soul food* was written and published by Sylvia Wood in 1992. This small, recipe packed, cookbook was based on dishes served at Wood’s famous Harlem restaurant, “Sylvia’s.” Not surprisingly, Sylvia Wood was born in Hemingway, South Carolina where she was taught to cook by her mother, Julia. After marrying her husband, Herbert, Sylvia and her family moved to New York where she obtained a job as a waitress. In 1962, she and her husband bought that same restaurant and it became the first “Sylvia’s.” Wood called her restaurant “a family affair” with her husband and all four of her children involved in the day-to-day operations.<sup>205</sup> Not surprisingly, many of the dishes served at *Sylvia’s* are as familiar to southerners as those prepared by Edna Lewis or LaMont Burns.

Wood placed several recipes for pork products in her work including ham, pigs’ tails, and fried chitterlings. Her baked ham recipe includes pineapples, pineapple juice, whole cloves, brown sugar, cinnamon, and corn starch. Wood secured the pineapple pieces onto the ham with the cloves, in the same way described by Rita Gibson. The ham was marinated in pineapple juice and a small amount of the juice was mixed with sugar and cornstarch was used as a glaze. Wood stated that “crunchy, rich pig’s tails are a soul food treat” (Wood and Styler 1992, 17). To

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<sup>205</sup> Sylvia Woods and Christopher Styler, *Sylvia’s Soul Food: Recipes from Harlem’s World-Famous Restaurant*, (New York: William Morrow, 1992), xiii. . (For the quotations from this book which follow, page numbers are indicated in parentheses following the quotation.)

make her version water, vinegar, onions, celery, salt, red pepper flakes, black pepper, and flour, were needed. First the tails were boiled in water, vinegar, and spices. Next, they were baked without the broth. Then flour paste was made and added to the broth to thicken it and the tails were placed back in. Chitterlings were first boiled with spices and then were added to a flour mixture containing additional spices. After placing them on a wire rack for a period of time, the chitterlings were fried in hot shortening. Wood stated that “potato salad and collard greens are the perfect accompaniments” to fried chitterlings (Wood and Styler, 1992, 18).

Two fried chicken recipes were included in Wood’s book, *Fried Chicken and Smothered Chicken*. Of her fried chicken recipes, Wood wrote “crispy-skinned fried chicken, Hot from the pan and bursting with juice, is one of the simplest and best-tasting soul food classics and one of our most popular dishes at *Sylvia’s*. To make fried chicken, Wood removed the skin and fat and put salt and pepper directly on each piece. Then she dipped these in flour mixed with paprika and fried them in vegetable oil. Wood’s Smothered Chicken was prepared in almost the same way. However, after the chicken was done “onions, green peppers, and celery” were added to the frying pan and cooked for ten minutes (Wood and Styler 1992, 42). The vegetables were then moved to the side and flour was put in. Once the flour was browned, water was added to make gravy. “Divide the chicken between two heavy skillets with lids or place them all in a large, heavy Dutch oven. Top with the gravy and vegetables and cover” (Wood and Styler 1992, 43).

Wood did not neglect seafood in her work, which contained several recipes, including two favorites, baked shad and fried catfish. Shad was baked with butter, salt, pepper, and dry bread crumbs and served it with a crabmeat-cornbread stuffing. Fried catfish, still a regional favorite, was a favorite dish on the menu at “*Sylvia’s*” as well. Wood stated that because catfish could be obtained from catfish farms, “firm, sweet, juicy catfish fillets are becoming more and more popular with home cooks” (Wood and Styler 1992, 70). Wood used garlic powder, salt, pepper, cracker meal, and vegetable oil in preparing her catfish. First, she seasons the fish directly, next passes it through the cracker meal, and then fries it in the vegetable oil.

Under the bean category, Wood had several recipes including one for lima beans and one for butter beans. Again there were many similarities to the previous recipes. Butter beans were prepared by boiling them with ham hocks, vegetable shortening, sugar, okra, salt, and pepper. Wood stated that “dried lima beans are the staple of soul food” (Wood and Styler 1992, 87). Her

beans were boiled with smoked ham or bone, bacon dripping, sugar, salt, and pepper. Green beans, collards, and mustard were all boiled with some type of pork. “The way most people prepare vegetables nowadays is more like dipping them in boiled water than really cooking them” (Wood and Styler 1992, 95). Wood does not subscribe to this method of cooking at all. Her green beans were prepared with smoked ham, salt, pepper, and sugar and were simmered for at least thirty minutes after the water had already come to a boil. Collard greens were prepared by boiling them with pork skin or ham hocks, salt, red pepper, sugar, and bacon drippings. If the pork was already cooked, then the greens would be allowed to simmer in the broth at least twenty minutes. Mustard greens were cooked in the same way collards were prepared but Wood had another recipe that includes adding cabbage, thyme leaves, and quartered white potatoes to the boil which made for an interesting variation.

Corn pudding could be found under the section on vegetables and greens. This recipe called for eggs, evaporated milk, sugar, cornstarch, creamed corn, salt, ground pepper, and butter. The ingredients were combined in a baking dish and placed in the oven for one hour.

Wood’s cornbread recipe was a standard southern recipe. However, unlike Burns, Wood included sugar in hers. Her recipe called for vegetable shortening, cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, milk, vegetable oil, and eggs. Her cracklings bread was almost identical, with some measurements being varied slightly, and of course, there was the addition of cracklings along with cane syrup. Wood described cracklings bread in this way: “this is corn bread died and gone to heaven – made rich with crunchy pork cracklings and sweetened with cane syrup” (Wood and Styler 1992, 108).

Any of our previous four cooks—Gibson, Jarvis, Akubue, or Lewis—could walk into either of these two restaurants and feel perfectly at home. In the case of both Burns and Wood, vegetables such as greens and green beans were boiled and seasoned with pork, salt, pepper, and onions. Chicken and fish were breaded and deep fried as were chitterlings. The corn pudding and crackling bread recipes given in both cookbooks were almost identical to those given by Lewis and Gibson, as were the recipes for baked ham given in Wood’s cookbook. Seasonings most consistently used in both restaurants were pork, salt, pepper, and onions. This leaves little doubt that Soul Food cooks are preserving a tradition transplanted by African-American slaves who wanted to keep alive the wonderful food traditions of their West African ancestors.



The use of food traditions as a vehicle for passing down family history was also a common theme. Burns discussed this concept in detail, but it was also alluded to by Gibson, Jarvis, and Akubue. People of different races, coming from a shared economic background and with southern ancestors, have a shared food tradition. Whether or not this is based on economics (and I do not believe that is the case) is an argument best left for another time. A recent article ran the *Johnson City Press* was aptly titled “Food is Roots; Food is History.”<sup>206</sup> I believe all six of the subjects of the research discussed in this chapter would agree.

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<sup>206</sup> *Johnson City Press* (Johnson City), 28 April 2004: 2D.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

West African food traditions are perhaps most clearly tied to Virginia foodways through cookery. Although Native Americans during the colonial period had tremendous influence on Anglo-American foodways, their influence on cooking techniques quickly diminished. The introduction of maize as a dietary staple and the methods of processing it are still an important part of Virginia diets as are many of the other cultivated vegetables Native Americans introduced. However, through diseases introduced by colonists and conflict with those same settlers, population numbers among Native Americans quickly diminished. Also, attitudes of westward moving colonists changed from one of assimilation toward a desire for separation. These factors, along with the development and stabilization of functioning communities and the availability of domestic animals, allowed colonists the opportunity to continue the food preparation techniques of their ancestors.

On the other hand, African and African-American slaves, through their long term and close contact with Anglo-Americans had many more opportunities to influence their owners and neighbors. African-Americans maintained many West African foodways during slavery. In preparing foods they used many of the same utensils acquired from sources similar to those they used in West Africa including gourds, shells, and handmade pottery. Africans arriving on the shores of Virginia would have found several plant foods already familiar to them, the most important being maize. New arrivals also found and willingly incorporated into their diet new foods both similar to and different from those found in their native lands, often preparing them in West African fashion.

The foodways that passed down from West Africa's shores, through slavery, and to Virginia's cooks today included preparation and seasoning techniques. One example of a preparation technique would be the one-pot meals, like Brunswick stew, still popular through out Virginia. An example of the seasoning techniques included the use of large amount of salt, pepper, onions, and other seasonings. Lastly, the use of meat as a seasoning in foods is unique to both Southern states, including Virginia, and West African societies.

The preparation of foods through frying also had its roots in West Africa. Although West Africans obtained oil for frying through plant products, Virginians—until the later part of the

twentieth century—preferred animal fat, the cooking process was essentially the same. When all of these factors are considered, it seems apparent that West Africans brought to Virginia as slaves passed down food traditions that crossed cultural lines and influenced the way Virginians cooked today.

I have in this thesis intentionally neglected the periods of history from the later nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century. My intent was to show the historical origins of a shared food tradition in Virginia, the evidence of which is presented in this work, and also evidence that similar patterns can be found today. However, a closer examination by future scholars of the many social and political changes in Virginia and other Southern states throughout the twentieth century would add much to our understanding of how cultural carryovers were affected by such historical events as the failure of Reconstruction, the first Great War, the Great Depression, and World War II. Thus this thesis represents only the beginning of an area of study that has heretofore been neglected by social historians, the transfer of West African traditions in societies of the upper south.

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